



**Losing It**

Kate Willoughby

## **Losing It**

Kate Willoughby

Published 2006

ISBN 1-59578-224-9

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2006, Kate Willoughby. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books

<http://lsbooks.com>

Email:

[raven@lsbooks.com](mailto:raven@lsbooks.com)

Editor

Corina Calsing

Cover Artist

April Martinez

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Dedication**

For my little sister, Trish, who always inspired me to set a good example.

## Chapter One

“How much pain is there when you lose your virginity?”

In the bathroom where he was laying tile, Ben Hayden fumbled. With a wild juggling motion, he caught the float just before it clattered into the tub. The splattered grout dribbled down the unfinished wall, but Ben just stood there, frozen, listening hard.

Although he knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, he hadn't bothered to remind his client, Charlotte that he was still working in the bathroom. After all, she and her sister Kerrie were only discussing seating arrangements for Kerrie's wedding. He'd expected to hear them chatter about cake toppers or menu choices.

Unfortunately, the bride-to-be had something less mundane on her mind.

“I mean, what if it hurts so bad I cry or something?” Kerrie asked. “You know how bad I am with pain. If I cry it could ruin everything.”

Despite the risk and his disapproving conscience, Ben leaned toward the open doorway. He was curious to hear what Charlotte had to say, because on and off over the past couple of months, he'd often considered crossing the line between contractor and client. Something about the way she used her hands seriously turned him on. She had this graceful way of manipulating things that mesmerized him, whether it be turning the pages of a book or buttoning a sweater. It didn't matter what she was doing, her hands drew his attention and had him thinking sexy thoughts in no time flat. Thoughts about what those hands would feel like splayed over his back as he kissed her, or clutching his butt as he thrust into her.

Ben blew out a silent breath and glanced at his watch. Today he'd lasted forty-five minutes before fantasizing. Sometimes he didn't even get past the front door before his imagination dove into the gutter. Good thing he always wore loose canvas pants to work.

“You won't cry,” Charlotte assured her sister. “It'll be wonderful. Now, let's get back to business. We have a wedding reception to plan.”

“On a scale from one to ten, then,” Kerrie insisted. “One being a paper cut and ten being ... oh, I don't know ... decapitation.”

Ben smothered a laugh, but Charlotte's reply sounded strangely off-hand. “Oh, somewhere in between, as I recall.”

“Well, is there anything I can do to alleviate it? Any certain position? Should he go in slow or just push real fast and get it over with?”

Crap. That did it. Glancing at the door, Ben decided to make a run for it.

“Kerrie, please!” Charlotte said, clearly exasperated. “I really don't want to discuss the thrusting velocity of your future husband!”

“I can't help it!” Kerrie sobbed, and to Ben's great discomfort, she started crying. “Please, I love Michael so much. I don't want him to be disappointed.”

With the utmost care, Ben set the float down and took a slow-motion step out of the tub. If he made it to the hall, the front door was only a couple of yards away.

“Look,” Charlotte said, “the truth is, I can’t help you because...”

He took another cautious step toward the door

“...because I’m a virgin, too.”

Ben stopped, mid-stride. Charlotte was a virgin? A smile dawned on his face as his mind did a half-gainer back into the gutter for an erotic free-for-all, celebrating the idea of introducing Charlotte to the wild, wet, and wonderful world of sex. He was busy imagining her panting under him, shuddering through her first man-induced orgasm, when he realized something wasn’t quite right. The delicious sexual scenarios he’d been imagining scattered as he listened and noticed that--Jesus Christ--there was now a chorus of crying: Charlotte and Kerrie, both of them in tears, two virgins whimpering together over their chastity.

Could things get any worse?

Yes, he thought, they could. Because if they found out he’d been listening, they were going to rip his ears off.

\*

“Charlotte, hey now, come on. Why are you crying?”

Charlotte took the tissue her sister offered her, appalled at her breakdown. How could she possibly tell Kerrie that she was jealous? She was happy beyond words that Kerrie had found Michael and was getting married, but still heart-wrenchingly, lie-awake-at-night jealous. What kind of horrible person resented the happiness of her own sister?

“I’m sorry, Kerrie. Never mind. Let’s just get back to the seating, okay? So, is Uncle Larry going to work out here at table seven?”

Kerrie shook her head, her face still bright with surprise. “You can’t be a virgin. What about Daniel? You told me Daniel was your first!”

Charlotte grimaced. “We never went beyond second base.”

“Robby?”

“He only got to first.”

“No one scored at all?” Kerrie asked in astonishment. “You made it all up? That whole thing about losing it in the back of Daniel’s Toyota? You made me swear not to tell Mom and Dad! I can’t believe this.”

“Believe it,” Charlotte said in a small voice.

“But why?” Kerrie paced next to the small kitchen table. “I don’t understand. Why did you do it?”

“I was trying to set a bad example,” Charlotte said, still sniffing.

“I thought you were supposed to set the good example!” Kerrie exclaimed.

“I know. Believe me, I know.”

Charlotte had been five years old when her mother told her she was going to be a big sister. Her parents

solemnly explained how Charlotte was to be one of Kerrie's first teachers (And oh, how Charlotte adored teachers at that age). Big sisters were responsible for guiding, and understanding, and helping little sisters, her parents had told her. She remembered the excitement of being trusted with such an awesome responsibility and not wanting to disappoint her parents. To this day, she treasured her role more than chafed under it. She and Kerrie had shared a childhood remarkably free of strife. However, at times, she'd used less traditional methods than her parents did, like the time her sister had gotten involved with Levi Russell.

"You wouldn't listen to me when I told you what a creep Levi was. You were really falling under his spell, and all he wanted was to nail you."

"Let me get this straight. You thought if you made up a bogus story about how crappy your first time had been with a high school boy and that you wished to God you'd waited, that I would learn from your mistake and keep to the path of goodness and purity?"

"Yes."

"Well, it worked," Kerrie admitted with a slump to her shoulders.

"I know."

Kerrie sighed. "I can't believe that you're a virgin. My brain is going through a complete realignment." She pressed her index fingers against her temples. "So, you've never had sex with a man?"

Charlotte gave her a look. "That's generally what being a virgin means."

"Nothing beyond second base?"

"No."

"Oh my God!" Kerrie exclaimed, eyes widening, obviously in the midst of a sexual epiphany. "That means I--I've gone farther than you. Michael's already..." Kerrie trailed off and, judging from her sappy smile, was obviously reliving what appeared to be many joyous erotic experiences short of intercourse.

"Snap out of it, Kerr."

Her sister came out of her reverie, grinning, but then her smile faded and she gazed at Charlotte in sympathy. "Oh, Charlotte, I feel so bad for you now."

"Don't." Charlotte felt her eyes sting again, but she refused to fall prey again to self-pity. Maybe later when she was alone, but not now.

Like the loyal sister she was, Kerrie lifted her chin defiantly. "That's right. There's absolutely no reason to feel bad for you. You'll find your someone special, just like I did. I know you will."

"I highly doubt that." Charlotte picked up the pen and started doodling. "The men aren't exactly beating down my door, in case you haven't noticed. They never have. If they did, they were always looking for you."

Kerrie had inherited their mother's good looks, and Charlotte took after her father, who could calculate home loan rates and mortgage payments in his head. They'd always tried to help each other--Charlotte tutoring her sister, and Kerrie doling out fashion and make-up advice--but when all was said and done, Kerrie got the guys and Charlotte got the good grades.

Kerrie bit her lip, clearly distressed. "I'm an awful sister. I've been so wrapped up in my own world that I didn't notice how miserable you are."

"I'm not miserable," Charlotte insisted. "I have my wonderful house. I'm healthy. And I get to wear a maid of honor dress that doesn't look like it came out of a clown's closet. What more could a girl ask for?"

"Someone to love and who loves you."

"Well, that would be nice, but I think the men who are willing to wait for sex until after marriage are either gay and don't know it, or are already taken, like Michael. When the guys find out that a home run is not in their immediate future, they take their ball--or balls, rather--and go home. And it's worse now that I'm older..."

"Twenty-five is not old!"

"It is for a virgin. Heck, most people over the age of sixteen have had sex." Charlotte sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "In fact, I'm seriously considering a one night stand just to get it over with. The last time I told a guy I was waiting for marriage I got this ... this look of stunned astonishment, like I just told him I don't have indoor plumbing and he'd have to use the outhouse..." Charlotte trailed off.

*OHMYGOD, BEN.*

Charlotte's insides turned to ice. Swallowing a lump of mortification that felt like Antarctica, she pricked her ears toward the bathroom where Ben was supposed to be working. Not a sound.

"Charlotte, what's wrong?"

"I--I forgot I had a doctor's appointment five minutes ago. You have to go. Now!"

"But what about the seating..."

"I'll come by later this week," Charlotte replied. "We'll get it all worked out then. Just hurry up and go."

In the bathroom, Ben realized that he only had a few moments before they came past on their way to the front door. Shit.

He should have closed the door and pretended he hadn't heard a thing, but instead, like a convict in the exercise yard after curfew, he panicked and tried to escape.

One big stride had him at the bathroom door. He peeked his head out. The coast was clear.

"Here, Kerr, here's the list and your purse."

Chairs scraped. Keys jingled.

"Okay, okay, I'm going!"

Hustling now, he got to the front door, but the goddamn security chain was fastened.

Ben felt like crying himself. He had just jerked the chain out of the groove and opened the door when they rounded the corner.

At the two feminine gasps, he spun around.

“Oh, hi,” he said lamely.

The sisters looked at each other.

*Think fast, buddy.*

“Knock, knock,” he said.

Charlotte answered, “Who’s there?”

“Isabel.”

“Isabel who?” Charlotte said.

“Isabel out of order? I had to knock.” *Big smile.*

Kerrie turned to Charlotte with a deadpan look on her face. “Is he serious?”

“Actually, I, ah, was just coming back in,” he stammered. “I forgot my, ah, pencil! In the truck.” He groped his back pocket, praying he had a pencil in it. He did. Praise the Lord. He held it up and smiled earnestly, the way he used to smile at his dad when he was trying to pull one over on him. He hoped it worked better on these ladies than it used to on his father.

Charlotte studied his face. A tiny trickle of sweat rolled down the back of his neck and he held on to his innocent expression like it was a life preserver from the Titanic.

He must have passed inspection because she said, albeit in a tight voice, “Kerrie, you remember Ben.”

“Ben Hayden.” He wiped his hand on his pants and shook hands with Kerrie. “I’m tiling the bathroom. If you ever need any contracting work done...” He handed her a business card out of habit.

Taking the card, Kerrie darted a worried glance at Charlotte. “I’ve actually heard quite a lot about y--Okay, okay, I’m going!” Kerrie said, as Charlotte herded her toward the open door like an impatient border collie. “So you’ll come by later, right, sis? I need to get the arrangements to the calligrapher so she can do the place cards.”

“Yeah. We’ll order pizza or something. Now bye!”

Charlotte shut the door. For a minute or so, she just stood there, her back to him. Then slowly she turned, her lips compressed, her face pale.

“You heard everything,” she said. “Don’t bother denying it because you have a pocket full of pencils right there.” She pointed at his chest.

“I’m sorry, Charlotte. I didn’t mean to...”

“Oh God.” Her face dissolved as she covered it with her hands and turned away. Ben’s heart felt like an anvil in his chest. Seeing her upset like this made him feel desperate. Knowing he was responsible made it worse.

“Come on Charlotte. It’s not that bad.”



“Yes, it is!” she mumbled into her hands. “I don’t want you to be here. Please leave now.”

She drew a shuddering breath, and he had to fight very hard not to pull her into his arms and bundle her tightly against his chest.

“Listen to me Charlotte, please.” He took one small step closer, and she tensed.

“No, go away Ben, please. I don’t want to hear it.”

“I just want to...”

“No, y-you’re fired! I don’t want to see you again. Now, please just go.”

## Chapter Two

The next day, Charlotte put on some Chopin, got herself a tall glass of iced tea, and revved up her laptop. The biotech company she worked for was anxious to get their newest drug on the market, and that wasn't going to happen unless the FDA approved it. Sighing, she opened up the IND application file and stared at the forms. She even managed to get to item number two before her eyes glazed over.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop thinking about Ben and what he'd heard yesterday. She'd replayed the conversation in her head at least a thousand times, as if by mentally flogging herself she could somehow lessen the humiliation. If only it had been someone other than Ben Hayden, she might have been able to bear it, but no.

It had all started almost a year ago when her uncle had died and left her his somewhat dilapidated Queen Anne Victorian house and a quarterly trust fund that allowed her to restore it little by little. Uncle John had known how much Charlotte, more than any other member of the family, loved the house. God bless Uncle John. Charlotte still missed him, and when she woke up every morning in her dream house, she looked up toward heaven to thank him.

She cherished not only the antiquated architecture, but also the story behind it. Uncle John and Aunt Marcy had lived in the house once upon a time, but after Aunt Marcy died unexpectedly from a stroke, Uncle John moved out, unable to live there without his wife. He never remarried, and Charlotte found that tragically romantic.

A reminder of their lasting love remained in the house. At the bottom of the stairs, Uncle John had carved one of the finials of the banister into the shape of a strawberry. Aunt Marcy had been known for her strawberry shortcake, preserves, and sky-high pies. Half the backyard had once been dedicated to rows and rows of strawberry plants. Charlotte hadn't had much luck with them since she moved in and was trying her hand at pineapples, a much tastier fruit in her opinion.

Despite the fact that the majority of the house was uninhabitable, Charlotte had moved in immediately. For a couple of weeks, she slept on an inflatable mattress in the kitchen. During that time, she interviewed quite a few contractors before finally finding Ben.

She hired him for two reasons. One, he had a reputation for being a man who took pride in his job and was a genius with his hands. As the weeks passed, her home slowly changed from a neglected ramshackle bundle of boards, to a house almost worthy of the label Painted Lady, even if it was in rural little Newhall, California, rather than San Francisco. She and Ben worked closely together, hashing out each phase of the renovation.

The second reason was he could have posed for the cover of *Sexy Construction Worker Monthly*, if there was such a publication. The first time they met, Charlotte fell halfway in love. Fell like a penny into a wishing well, burdened with dreams that would never come true, because Ben Hayden was the type of guy who would never ever notice her.

He was so gorgeous. It was as if she'd had a vague chalk-outline of the perfect sexy man in her mind, and when he appeared in her doorway, huge, handsome, and dressed in his ubiquitous loose painter's pants and low-riding tool belt, the outline coalesced into Ben. And when he'd smiled down at her, even though it was an innocent nice-to-meet-you smile, she melted like an ice cube over a Bunsen burner.

And now, she couldn't bear the thought of even facing him again. Not after what he'd overheard.

*I'm a virgin...*

*The men aren't exactly beating down my door...*

Charlotte shuddered. He didn't even know she had breasts. He'd always stayed on his side of the construction zone, friendly and professional, as was proper and expected.

There was nothing else to do except mail Ben his last check and hire someone else to finish the bathroom. Someone old, fat, and ugly.

Perhaps with a hearing problem.

The doorbell rang. Charlotte went to the front door, pointedly ignoring the unfinished bathroom.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Ben."

Charlotte suddenly needed to pee.

Taking as long as possible to unlock the door, she composed herself and decided on the spot to approach this as though yesterday's unwitting confession was of no more importance than him finding out that she once had a serious crush on Doogie Howser, M.D.

She opened the door and smiled like the third runner-up for Miss America. "Hi, Ben."

Unprepared for the sight that greeted her, Charlotte stared. He didn't look like his normal self. He wasn't wearing his spattered painter's pants or clunky work boots. He was wearing worn-in jeans that molded to his muscular thighs in a way that his loose coveralls never had. In the open V of his polo shirt, she could see chest hair, and oh, baby, Charlotte liked chest hair on a man.

"Can I come in?" he asked, a half smile on his lips. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh, sure." She stepped aside, and the scent of his aftershave went to her head like an aphrodisiac. She was glad she had the door to keep her steady, especially when he passed her on his way to the kitchen and she saw his denim-clad butt.

As she followed him, she reminded herself to approach this situation maturely.

"Ben, I shouldn't have fired you yesterday," she said, taking a seat at the table. "That was wrong of me, and I'd very much like you to finish the bathroom."

He pulled a chair out and sat too, resting his elbows on his knees. God, even his elbows looked sexy.

"I'm glad, Charlotte. I want to finish your bathroom, too, but I also want to do more than that."

Although his statement was benign, Ben's voice had a husky quality to it Charlotte had never heard before. It was a sign of how bad she had it for him that he was talking about bathroom tile but it felt like he was making love to her with his voice.

"Have you finally changed your mind about my fretwork?" she asked.

"You and your damned fretwork," he said with a chuckle, shaking his head.

The decorative trim she wanted to add to the roofline was a long-standing joke between them. When

he'd first taken on the job, he'd assured her he could meet all her needs within budget, expressing doubt only about the wooden trim. Charlotte lived on Hummingbird Lane and she wanted hummingbirds along her roofline. Ben argued that yards and yards of custom-carved millwork would cost more than she could afford, and they'd never resolved the problem.

"I keep telling you I'd be perfectly happy with something you make. We don't need to hire some artsy-fartsy craftsman whose family has been carving fretwork for generations from wood they grow themselves. I know you can handle it."

He chuckled. Then his eyes narrowed and he looked at her with an intensity that made her quiver inside. To her utter amazement, he leaned forward and took her hand in both of his. He rubbed his thumbs over her knuckles in little circles that got her heart pounding like she was thirty minutes into an aerobics class.

"I'm touched by your confidence in me," he said, "but when I said I wanted to do more, Charlotte, I wasn't referring to your house."

"You weren't?" She gulped.

"No."

Ben watched Charlotte squirm in her seat. She tried to withdraw her hand, but he couldn't let her; it felt too damn good. To finally touch her in a personal way was more of a turn-on than he'd ever imagined. In a way, she'd done him a favor when she fired him. If he was no longer her employee, he was free to pursue her, catch her, and devour her alive. Yeah, he thought, picturing her thighs open to his gaze, her sweet, sexy cleft waiting for hot swipes of his tongue.

"I don't understand," she said.

Ben set aside his fantasies and concentrated on the task at hand. "I'll be more direct, then. That's more my style anyway, Charlotte. Not that you'd know that. I've been holding myself back all these months."

She wrinkled her nose at him in that cute way she had. "Huh. You'd think a person would know if their ears had waxy build-up."

He laughed and she relaxed a little.

"See, I like you, Charlotte. I like you a lot, but we had a business relationship, and I don't mix business with pleasure."

"I-I'm sorry, I really think I have to get a Q-tip," she said, getting up.

Ben laughed again as he stood up too, still not relinquishing her hand. "You're making me work awfully hard at this, Charlotte."

"That's one of the things I admire most about you. You're a damn hard worker," she said nervously.

*Oh, I'm hard, all right.*

He moved to stand very close to her. "As I was saying, yesterday you were my boss. I had a job to do for you. Today, I'm a free agent, which for me means I can finally tell you what I've been wanting to tell you for a very long time."

She looked up at him, looking so adorably confused, that he gave up.

“Aw, screw it,” he mumbled, and sliding one hand around her neck, he bent down and brushed his mouth against hers.

She stood, her eyes wide, like she was in stasis. He kissed her again, nibbling at her lower lip, still holding her hand, rubbing it, massaging her palm in an effort to get her relaxed. Lord, she was tense.

She mumbled something against his lips.

He pulled back slightly. “What?”

“You’re kissing me.”

“I know. Kiss me back.”

He smiled when she just stared at him.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know how,” he teased. “Remember, I happen to know you and Robby got to first base.”

Anticipating her retreat, he kept her close with an arm around her back.

“I can’t believe you said that.”

“Well, it’s the reason I came here today, you know.”

“To get to first base?” she sputtered.

“And to discuss all the rest of the bases,” he said with a predatory grin.

A grin that was wiped right off his face when she hauled back and slapped him.

### Chapter Three

“Ow!” Ben cried. “What the hell was that for?”

Charlotte rubbed her hand. It must have been smarting, because his cheek sure was.

“How dare you! You actually think that because of what I said yesterday that I’d just...! I am not an easy lay, you low-life creep! Get out of my house!”

“The hell I will!” Ben struggled to figure out where he’d gone wrong. “I’m not a low-life creep. God Charlotte, I’ve been holding myself back for months: *for months*, not wanting to cross the line while I was working for you.”

She faltered, but her brows quickly knitted together again with renewed anger. She stood straight like a pint-sized soldier and said a little shakily, “That’s admirable, really, but I won’t be a pity project for you either, no matter how handsome you are.”

He stepped toward her, but she raised a hand in warning. He stayed where he was.

“Charlotte, I could never pity you. How could you think that? Let me explain. I should have explained right off the bat, but I jumped the gun. I’m sorry. Please listen.”

She regarded him dubiously, but finally nodded. “All right, but no touching,” she grumbled. “I can’t think when you’re touching me.”

As he sat again, placing his hands on his knees, she went to the kitchen counter and reached for one of her pineapples. Her latest outdoor project was propagating them from their crowns. It seemed like every day she was pushing pineapple on him just so she could get her hands on another crown.

“All right,” he said, “here’s what I should have told you before I kissed you. The truth is, I was one of America’s oldest virgins, too.”

Scoffing, she hacked off the pineapple top and put it aside for planting later. “That is so ridiculous I can’t even begin to tell you.”

“It’s the truth Charlotte. I swear.”

“Keep talking,” she said, slicing off the other end. “I’d like to hear the story of how a guy that looks like you couldn’t get laid.”

“Just like I’d like to hear the story of how a woman like you thinks she’s an object of pity.”

“You first,” she said, pointing her knife at him.

As she trimmed off the prickly skin, a frown pinched her brows together. Ben wished he could kiss it away, but he’d obviously blown his kissing privileges for now.

“Fair enough,” he said. “Me first.” He rubbed his thighs. He took a deep breath and tried to talk. Nothing came out. Jesus, this confession stuff was hard.

“Okay, it’s like this. I was really a scrawny, pimply mess in junior high and high school. Not only that, I had no self-confidence whatsoever.” He neglected to mention the reason for that. No need to get into his dismal academic past. Not if she was satisfied with pimply and scrawny, which was the truth anyway.

“Well, somewhere between then and now you filled out and developed the confidence. Maybe too much,” she added under her breath.

“Yeah, but, if you want to keep the baseball analogy going, for a long, long time, all through my teens, I wasn’t even getting up to bat, if you know what I mean. Hell! You know, I don’t think I was even in the ballpark.”

Charlotte stopped in the act of putting the pineapple chunks in a bowl. Her face dissolved into a look of such empathy, that he decided that exposing his sad history as the dateless wonder of early nineties was worth it. He should have known she’d react this way. She was so utterly compassionate. When he’d watched her in the garden, she had fits of guilt when she cut a worm in half with her spade. She even apologized out loud to the creature, as if the worm had ears.

“Oh Ben, you poor thing. That must have been horrible.”

If he’d been sitting next to her, he’d have put his head on her shoulder so she’d be tempted to stroke his hair in comfort. He settled for saying, with an appropriate amount of dejection (and a wounded sigh for good measure), “It wasn’t a picnic, but I survived.”

“I thought I had it bad when I was in high school. What I went through was nothing compared to that.”

Ben allowed himself a little bit of internal preening as she brought over the bowl of fruit, rejoining him at the table. This time she took his hands in hers and squeezed them.

“And it’s so ... so brave of you to tell me. I mean, that has to be the most debilitating thing a guy can face...”

“Come on Charlotte, don’t exaggerate. I was just a late bloomer.”

She pressed her lips together and looked like she might actually cry. “A late bloomer. That’s right. That’s what you were. Oh, Ben, I’m so sorry I slapped you. I didn’t realize. I’m so, so sorry.”

*No doubt about it, Ben thought, this was a comin’-at-you-live Hallmark moment.*

“Don’t worry about it,” he said magnanimously. He put a large piece of the pineapple in his mouth and talked around it. “I messed up, too.”

“So, was time all you needed to get cured?”

He blinked. “Cured?”

“Of your impotency.”

“Impo...” Ben almost spat out the pineapple. Horrified, he leapt to his feet, knocking his chair backward.

“Impotency?” he said after he choked down the fruit. “I wasn’t impotent! Jesus!”

Charlotte stood up and righted the chair. “But you said...”

“No!” Ben raked his hands through his hair, grabbed tufts of it and paced around. Every Y chromosome in his body howled in vehement denial. “I didn’t say I was impotent!”

“Yes you did.”

“Charlotte honey, Listen to me,” he said, taking her by the shoulders and locking eyes with her. “I am not, never have been, never will be impotent. My equipment is in perfect working order, believe me.”

“But you said you weren’t even getting up. I may be a virgin, but I know what ‘getting up’ means.”

Ben thought back. “No, I said, ‘getting up to bat.’ To bat, as in, not even getting dates. That’s what I meant. Jesus.” He rubbed his face. “Impotent? Jesus.”

His head snapped up when he heard her snicker. “This isn’t funny,” he growled.

“Yes it is.” Her smile broadened and her eyes shone with amusement.

“Like hell it is. You actually believed that I couldn’t get it up! Jesus, I can’t believe this.” He threw his hands up in the air. “Well, you leave me no choice. Now I have to prove myself.”

Her smile fluttered away. “Now wait a minute. Not that again.”

“Oh yeah, that again.” He strode over to her and took her by the shoulders. “Charlotte Gibson, it’s Opening Day. I’m up to bat--and I do mean up. If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to prove to you that I can slam the ball right out of the park.”

Charlotte tried to brace herself but couldn’t. Even if she’d had time, she couldn’t have prepared herself for the onslaught of Ben’s sexuality. If he’d seemed the mild-mannered carpenter before, he had masked his true nature very well, because now the full force of his intent, his raw masculinity, overwhelmed her. She felt like a defenseless hermit crab facing a tsunami.

*Have mercy on a poor virgin*, she thought as his mouth swooped down to cover hers.

With one big arm wrapped around her, he held her immobile as he kissed her. This time he didn’t try coaxing a response from her; he demanded it. The moment she felt his tongue, she parted her lips. With a rough groan, he slanted his mouth and plunged in. Charlotte barely had time to kiss him back before he pulled away and dragged his lips along her jaw to her ear, pressing hot wet kisses there and then over her neck as if he couldn’t figure out where to settle. Everywhere he touched her, she burned.

“Jesus Charlotte, you taste so good.”

“It’s the pineapple,” she mumbled before he kissed her again.

He slid his tongue inside her mouth, filling her with a desire so overwhelming she’d have fallen if he hadn’t been holding her up. She clutched his big shoulders and moaned in her throat as she felt his hand slide around to cup her breast. The immediacy of his erection against her belly thrilled her. Was she going to lose her virginity here in the kitchen? Ben certainly didn’t show any signs of slowing down. Not that she particularly wanted him to.

As if reading her mind, he pulled back. His rainforest green eyes had darkened with passion, and his voice was hoarse when he spoke.

“I want you so much, Charlotte. If you still want to lose your virginity, like you said...”

Shocking herself, she said in a rush, “I do. I want you to be my first. I want you to show me what to do so that next time I’m with a guy in bed, I won’t come off like ... I don’t know, like a football player trying to figure skate.”



He chuckled. “You, Charlotte, are about as far from a football player as a person can get.”

“You know what I mean,” she scolded, secretly pleased with the compliment.

“And just to make sure you know what I mean,” he said, “you’re not expecting me to finish up the bathroom, right?”

“But it looks like a Jackson Pollock painting in there,” she protested.

This time he didn’t laugh at her joke. Instead of the familiar boyish twinkle in his eye, there was a firm glint.

“I’m sorry, Charlotte. I told you before, I won’t have a personal relationship with someone I work for. It’s a rule of mine. If I’m working for you, I can’t sleep with you.”

So, she said quite soberly, “Okay. Well, that’s settled then. You are fired. Forever. Pack up your tools and take off your clothes.”

The twinkle returned, and he threw back his head and roared, gathering her into his embrace.

“God, I love how you make me laugh,” he said, rubbing his cheek against her hair.

*I love how you make me wet*, she thought wickedly. Then she realized how she could have her tile, her man, and eat him too.

“No, I take it back. You’re hired again.”

“What?”

“Finish my bathroom first. Once you’re done, I’ll fire you once and for all. Then you can do me without a guilty conscience. Besides,” she said, looking at him askance, “I know it would kill you to leave the job unfinished.”

A wry smile crept over his face. “You know, you’re right.” He scratched his chin. “I was feeling a little unsettled at the thought of someone else messing with my tile. But I promised a client I’d refinish her deck in time for her husband’s fortieth birthday party, so I won’t be free to finish the tile for a few days.”

“That’s okay. I’ve waited twenty-five years. I can wait a few more days. Is it a deal then?” She held out her hand.

“Deal.”

Ben’s eyes narrowed as he shook her hand slowly, and Charlotte shivered. His lazy smile promised a hot, juicy erotic awakening she’d never forget.

Now all she had to do was not rape him while he was tiling the bathroom.

## Chapter Four

“Spill it,” Kerrie said to Charlotte as they set aside the finished seating charts for the wedding reception and reached for their reward of gourmet pizza.

They were at their parents’ house where Kerrie was living for one more week. The Gibsons lived high above the San Fernando Valley where their palatial home commanded almost two acres of prime real estate. Charlotte’s father had a remarkable head for business, a knack for recognizing valuable property, and charisma by the gallon, which was why his company, Monticello Realty, was the most successful agency on this side of the hill.

But right now, his charisma was turned off as he enjoyed his own small pizza in his custom-designed home theatre, watching ESPN. Surrounded by state-of-the-art speakers, he liked the volume turned up with a small inserted picture of Fox News running simultaneously in the corner of the big plasma screen. Their mother was playing bunco with her group and wouldn’t be home until midnight.

Kerrie snaked a morsel of duck that had fallen off her slice and popped into her mouth. “What happened with your contractor?”

“Just the impossible.” Charlotte picked the slivers of green onion off her piece and made a neat little pile of them. Then she nudged the onions into a heart shape and smiled at how silly she was being but unable to resist.

Kerrie said, “That encompasses quite a lot. Could you narrow it down?”

“You realize he heard everything,” Charlotte said, eyeing Kerrie sideways. “The whole sordid conversation.”

“Ah, that was obvious. Come on, he needed a pencil?” Kerrie rolled her eyes. “Still, gotta give him credit for trying.”

“Well, even knowing I’m going to be an utter novice in bed, apparently...” Charlotte allowed herself a small, smug smile as she leaned forward and whispered, “...he wants me.”

“What? What do you mean, ‘he wants you?’” Kerrie said indignantly. She plopped her pizza back down on her plate and frowned. “What did he say? ‘Hey, baby, I’ll pop your cherry for ya’?”

Charlotte’s smile faded. “You make it sound so crass.”

“Well, it is.” Kerrie looked outraged. “I mean, he’s extremely cute and all, if you like the sweaty, dirty fingernails type, but it sounds to me like he’s your typical male, taking advantage of what he thinks is a sure thing.”

Frowning at the green onion heart, Charlotte said, “But it’s not like that, Kerrie. He says he’s wanted me for a while. Before he overheard us talking.”

“That’s even worse. Why didn’t he ask you out then? I mean, if the guy can’t even work up the courage to ask you out...”

“He said he doesn’t like to mix business with pleasure. Isn’t that deliciously old-school, gentlemanly?”

Kerrie looked doubtful. “I don’t know. You’re not going to do it, are you?”

“I know it goes against everything I’ve ever preached to you, but yes, I am.” Charlotte took a big bite of

pizza and smiled as she chewed.

“Charlotte! You can’t. After waiting all this time, you’re going to toss away your virginity on some ... some uncouth construction worker?”

“Uncouth?” Charlotte mumbled with her mouth full. “I can’t believe you used that word.”

“It fits.”

“Well, so will he.”

Kerrie arched a patrician eyebrow. “Now who’s being crass?”

“Look, sis, a person’s virginity isn’t a precious gift anymore.”

“It is too. Michael has told me how much it means to him that I’ll only ever be his and that he recognizes how difficult it must have been for me to save myself...”

“Ahem.”

Kerrie and Charlotte looked up to see their father standing in the doorway with his empty pizza box. He looked slightly ill.

“I can tell you’re talking about sex,” he said, opening the fridge to get himself a can of soda, “and I don’t want to hear it. Just don’t say anymore until I’m out of the room. That’s all I ask.”

Charlotte and Kerrie laughed as he returned to his precious home theatre, where he turned up the volume so loud that Charlotte felt like she was actually at the Staples Center. She jerked her head toward the backyard, and Kerrie nodded. Together, they gathered up their meal and went outside.

Kerrie opened the outdoor fridge and took out a bottle of Chardonnay. As she opened it, Charlotte took a seat on the large flagstone patio and looked out on the thousands of lights spread below, as always identifying the places she knew. There was her high school; she could see the huge lights of the football field. There was Van Nuys airport with its brightly colored runway markers, and the curving band of red and white that designated the 405 freeway heading north toward her little town of Newhall thirty miles away.

“So your mind’s made up?” Kerrie asked, setting down a glass of wine for Charlotte.

Charlotte recalled Ben’s drugging kisses yesterday, how his tongue had invaded her mouth, how he had crushed her to his big body, making her feel oddly fragile yet powerful at the same time. It was a feeling she wanted to explore much more fully.

“Yes, my mind’s made up,” she said. “I trust Ben to treat me right.”

“I still think it’s a mistake,” Kerrie said, taking a swig of wine. “He’s a laboring hulk. Worse, he’s a hulking laborer.”

“Get your nose out of the air, Kerrie. You don’t know him like I know him. It’s going to be wonderful.”

“For once in your life, you should follow my example.”

“Not likely. Michael’s a one of a kind guy. I’ll never find someone as perfect as he is. Especially looking like I do. You’re the beauty in the family, don’t forget.”

Kerrie's Catherine Zeta Jones looks had earned her the Homecoming Queen crown in her senior year. Her rich chestnut hair and striking aqua eyes had always inspired tongue-on-the-ground adulation from men and envy in women.

"You really need to stop putting yourself down, Charlotte. When you make an effort with your appearance, you're pretty. Of course men aren't going to notice you if you cower in the corner behind a newspaper."

"Not all of us can go up to a man and lay ourselves on the table like brownies at a bake sale."

"But there are all kinds of brownies, Charlotte. I mean, obviously you don't want to be a slutty brownie with tacky sprinkles and a sign that says, 'Eat me.' But you act like you have mold on you, and you don't. You're a lovely, respectable chocolate dessert with yummy, traditional chocolate frosting and any man would be lucky to have you on his plate."

"Exactly," Charlotte said, lifting her glass in agreement. She was going to have crazy wild sex with Ben, and when it was over, she'd have some mighty fine memories of her first time. In addition, she'd finally be the kind of woman men expected these days. A woman unafraid of embarking on a sexual relationship and therefore better able to hang on to a guy long enough for him to realize what a prime catch she was.

Charlotte smiled. "After Ben, I'm going to be a brownie instead of a closed up box on the shelf."

"All right, do what you want. Just remember the man is definitely not husband material. He would so not fit in. Did he even go to college?"

"I don't know. You ask for licenses and referrals when you hire a contractor, not diplomas. What is your problem, anyway? I can't believe you're making such a fuss about this."

Kerrie shrugged and nudged a piece of crust across her plate. "I guess it's your decision. As long as it doesn't mess up Wednesday."

*Uh-oh.* Charlotte tried to remember what was planned for Wednesday and failed.

"Ah, I just need a little reminder what Wednesday is."

Kerrie shook her head. "Box seats, reserved months ago for the Hollywood Bowl?"

Charlotte bit her lip. "I'm sorry, you know how I am. You should have reminded me. It's Chopin, right?"

"With Michael's best man. You remember that part?"

Charlotte's eyes widened. "Oh, crap. No, I didn't."

"That's okay. You're gonna like him. His name is Grant Garver," Kerrie said, leaning forward. "He's an extremely intelligent, funny, and unattached doctor. He's cute, too, in a Malibu Ken doll sort of way."

"But what about Ben?"

"What about him?" Kerrie lifted the pizza box lid and after examining what was left, let the lid fall closed. "He's not your boyfriend. You haven't even gone out on a date, have you?"

Charlotte reluctantly admitted they hadn't.

“Then I don’t see a problem,” Kerrie said. “Come on sis. It’s one harmless double date. Plus, I found out something I think you’ll find extremely interesting.”

Charlotte sighed, wanting to let that little bit of bait go unnoticed, but her curiosity got the best of her. “All right. This better be good.”

Kerrie’s eyes widened in excitement. “It just so happens that his family owns an historic Queen Anne style B and B in South Carolina. A Victorian, no less. Michael and I already have plans to stay there for our first wedding anniversary.”

Kerrie rubbed the condensation on her wine glass with her thumb. “I have to admit, he does sound intriguing, but I have to tell you, I still have nightmares about Neil.”

Kerrie crossed her arms. “Oh, that again. One little mistake that wasn’t even my fault. He was perfectly normal at work.”

“I’m sure he was. It was only when he went home to his mother...” Kerrie had the good grace to wince. “...that he showed his true colors. I swear to God she cut his meat for him. I saw it with my own eyes.”

Charlotte shuddered at the memory.

“And he wasn’t the only ‘little mistake,’ Miss Selective Memory. Willard was no prize, either. All I could think of was rats and rotund meteorologists.”

“Well, the third time’s a charm,” Kerrie said firmly, “Grant’s not like them. He and Michael have been best friends since college. They even did their residency together.”

“He’s a doctor?”

“Hold on. You haven’t heard the best part. He’s in cosmetic surgery.”

Kerrie’s eyes took on the glint that heretofore had only been spotted just prior to the semi-annual sale at Nordstrom’s.

“Just think of it Charlotte. If you married him, we’d all be set for life. Facelifts, tummy tucks, you name it.”

“Kerrie, I love you, I really do, but I won’t marry a man just so you can have a free boob job.”

Kerrie made a moue. “Give me a break. You know I didn’t mean it that way. It would just be a nice perk.” She eyed Charlotte knowingly. “Come on. You can’t tell me you’re not the teensiest bit more interested in him now that you know he’s an M.D...”

With her own career in pharmaceuticals, Charlotte had often thought it might be nice to marry a man with a medical background. And she admitted she was used to a certain standard of living that a doctor could certainly maintain for her. However, she also suspected that this mild yearning for a medical man might be largely due to maternal inculcation that had begun when she was a child and continued to this day. Her mother seemed to have a microchip embedded under her skin that was tuned to single upper income professionals, but especially doctors. And when she found one, watch out. She was on him quicker than Clinton on a new intern.

“I have a feeling you and Mom hatched this plan together, and I don’t like it...”

“But you’ll go?”

“Yes,” Charlotte said with exaggerated reluctance. “It wouldn’t be right to back out when it’s been planned for so long.”

“Excellent.” Kerrie beamed. “And you’re going to tell Ben you changed your mind, right?”

“Wrong.”

“But...”

“Look, Kerrie, I still want to ditch my hymen, and Ben’s my man. But it’s pretty obvious that it’s a one-time deal. After I’m ... broken in, that’ll be that. He’ll go his way and I’ll go mine.”

## Chapter Five

Ben cursed himself. Because of his carelessness, he was stuck removing the dried on grout in Charlotte's bathroom, a time-consuming, painstaking process. If he'd paid attention to his job in the first place, he could have been in bed with her tonight, kissing her, caressing her, discovering a thousand ways to make her moan with pleasure.

On the other hand, maybe it was a good thing that he had to wait until Friday. This way he could plan. After all, his male pride was on the line.

For God's sake, she'd thought he was impotent. Impotent! Proving his masculinity to her had become job one. Damned if he was going to let her go on believing that he'd ever had a problem getting it up. No, by the time he was done with her, she'd know beyond the shadow of a doubt that Ben Hayden was far from impotent. In fact, maybe, just maybe he'd satisfy her so completely that for the rest of her life she'd compare all her other lovers to him and find them wanting.

Damn straight.

Smiling to himself, he scrubbed the brush over the grout and formulated a strategy.

Should he take her out for dinner first? That was easy. No. A restaurant was too impersonal, considering what was to happen afterward. Better if he cooked something for her. He was no gourmet, but he had a few tried and true recipes.

Where was the best place to make love to her? He usually didn't like taking women to his place. They invariably snooped in his medicine cabinet and sometimes even checked out his closet and dresser drawers. Plus, he didn't live in the safest part of town. Yet, the idea of bringing Charlotte home brought none of his normal bristly feelings of discomfort. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea of giving Charlotte her first taste of lovemaking in his own bed.

He pictured how she'd look naked on his dark blue sheets after he'd made her come for the third or fourth time. How her eyes would be half-closed, her lips swollen from his kisses, her nipples still taut and moist from his mouth...

He tightened his grip on the bristle brush as his cock pulsed with lust.

"Ben?"

He almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of Charlotte's voice. "Jesus! You scared the crap out of me."

He didn't dare face her, not with the raging hard-on he was sporting.

"I wanted to know if you were hungry."

Then he thought, *What the hell?*

With a grin, he turned around slowly. "You bet I'm hungry."

Charlotte opened her mouth, probably to offer him a sandwich or soup or something, but when her eyes dropped down to his groin, her jaw dropped too.

"Whoa! What's going on there?" she asked.

He laughed. “Man, I didn’t realize exactly how innocent you are.”

“Very funny. I know what that is. I was just surprised to see it. You know, here in my bathroom.” She wrinkled her nose. “Does grout removal really do it for you?”

Her eyes darted to his erection again, and because he knew it would unsettle her, he flexed it.

“Holy crap,” she said with a nervous laugh.

He chuckled. She looked so cute when she was flustered.

“No, Charlotte, grout removal doesn’t do it for me. You do it for me. This happens whenever I think about you. Anytime, anywhere, even in the bathroom.”

“That’s...” she gestured vaguely with her hand, “...because you were thinking about me?”

Knowing he was asking for trouble, but not really caring, he stepped out of the bathtub and went to stand as close to her as he could without touching her.

“Is that so hard to believe?” he asked.

Bending his head, he touched his lips to hers. He meant it to be soft and brief, but instead they shared a long, lingering kiss that grew in temperature and urgency, degree by degree, until Ben was holding her so tightly, he was afraid she couldn’t breathe. Her tongue was so slick against his, he wondered what it would feel like on his skin, and with her breasts pillowed against his chest, it was all he could do not to clutch them in his greedy hands. He didn’t care anymore about his stupid business-before-pleasure edict. He wanted to take Charlotte now--carry her up the stairs to her bedroom and bury himself deep inside her.

But he couldn’t do that. She was a virgin. She deserved nice and slow the first time. A gentle seduction, one that would lead her through every stage of arousal until she yielded to him in soft sensual torment, so ready for him that any pain she felt would be welcome, if only to end the anticipation.

The phone rang, startling them both, but he was thankful for the interruption. Ben pulled away, but Charlotte remained motionless. The phone rang again before her eyes fluttered open. Her pupils were dark and wide, her lips wet and slightly parted.

“Kiss me some more,” she murmured and pulled his head down for another kiss.

Ben resisted. “The phone...”

“Forget the phone,” she said in a husky voice. “Take me upstairs.”

He shut his eyes as the phone rang again. It about killed him to say, “I want to wait. I want to do this right. Your first time shouldn’t be a spur of the moment event.”

She heaved a profound sigh and took a step back. “You’re right. We should wait.” She sighed again. “I’d better go get that.”

As he heard her answer the phone well within earshot, he wrestled with his conscience again, and again his conscience went down after only a few moments. If she wanted her conversation to be completely private, she could take the phone to a part of the house where he couldn’t possibly hear.

“Oh, my God! I forgot! What time again? What? Oh, crap. G’bye!”



Charlotte hustled out of the kitchen looking extremely flustered.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Kerrie set me up on a blind date a while ago, and I forgot it was tonight.”

Ben felt something prickly and unpleasant in his stomach, like he’d swallowed a cactus.

“Say you’re sick,” he said, as if he had to power to dictate her social schedule.

“No, it’s too late. He’s already on his way. It shouldn’t be too bad. Most of the time, we’ll be listening to the orchestra. We’ve got box seats at the Bowl.”

“The Hollywood Bowl?”

“Yes, and they’re playing Chopin.”

“Your favorite,” he muttered with a frown. “Let me get this straight. You’ve never met this guy before?”

“No. I told you, it’s a blind date. Look, I don’t have time for this. I have to get ready. He’s going to be here in fifteen minutes.”

“It’s only four, for Christ’s sake. Is it an afternoon concert?”

She cocked her head at him. “Have you ever been to the Bowl?”

He felt like an uncultured barbarian when he had to answer, “No.”

He was Los Angeles born and raised and he’d never attended any type of concert that didn’t require electrical instruments, let alone one at the renowned Hollywood Bowl.

Charlotte waved a hand in the air dismissively. “I’ll have to take you sometime. Anyway, you go long before the concert actually starts and eat alfresco. Most people eat at picnic tables or on blankets on the ground, but in the box seats, you can order your food ahead of time and have it served to you in your private box. That’s what we’re doing tonight. Some people even bring crystal wine glasses and fresh flower arrangements for the table, if you can believe that.”

She shook her head and frowned into the distance. “Dress like a brownie, she says,” Charlotte muttered. “I have half a mind to wear sweats just to make her mad.”

With that, she scurried up the stairs.

Ben stood there, disgruntled with the entire situation. Only minutes before Charlotte had been an armful of hot passion, kissing him deeply, molding her body to his. She practically begged him to take her to bed. Now she was upstairs getting ready to go out with some other man.

How the hell had that happened?

He decided to hang around and check the guy out, make sure he wasn’t some psycho. You couldn’t be too careful these days.

When the doorbell rang, Charlotte barreled down the stairs. “Coming!” she called.

Ben frowned when he saw her. Her job required lab coats and she always dressed for comfort

underneath, so he'd never seen her ... well, done up. She looked good. Damn good. Make-up, a skirt, jewelry, even. Her eyes seemed merrier; her shiny-lipped smile more contagious. The light sweater she wore clung to her breasts, and the sheer floral skirt drew attention to her ankles--the ones he'd imagined locked behind his back as he thrust into her. While he appreciated the sight, the fact that she'd dolled herself up for some other man rankled.

He went into the bathroom to check his own appearance. He was clean, but still in his sloppy work uniform. Usually he relished working in the most comfortable clothes in the world, but today, he definitely did not.

He heard Charlotte open the door.

"You must be Grant," she said.

"And you're Charlotte," the man answered. "It's terrific to meet you. Kerrie and Michael have gone on and on about you. I'm sure you've gotten an earful about me, too."

"Try two earfuls. Are those for me? How sweet."

Realizing the rat bastard must have brought flowers, Ben grabbed some of his supplies and headed out of the bathroom on the pretext of making a run to his truck. One thing in his favor, he knew Charlotte went weak-kneed from his kisses and she wanted him to take her virginity. This Grant guy certainly couldn't lay claim to that. He kept that firmly in his mind as he rounded the corner, but when he saw the man, he stopped short.

"Holy shit. Grant Garver?" Ben exclaimed, surprised as hell.

"Well, if it isn't Ben Hayden," Grant replied, shaking hands with Ben. "What a small world."

"You two know each other?" asked Charlotte.

"Believe it or not, we went to high school together," Grant said. "What, biology and P.E.? What else?"

"A couple of history classes, too."

Grant hadn't changed all that much. Fewer pimples. Better clothes. His surfer accent was subdued, but he had the same sandy blond hair and Crest-with-fluoride smile.

"So, what have you been doing since then?" Grant asked. "I always wondered what had happened to you. Everyone did."

Ben hurriedly dug out a business card. He wasn't sure if Grant knew he'd never gotten his high school diploma, but he didn't want to take the chance that little tidbit would come up, especially in front of Charlotte.

"I'm in contracting. Just finishing some renovation work on this place. Been on my own, going on five years now."

"Contracting." Nodding, Grant gave the interior a once-over. "That's fantastic."

"What about you?"

"Cosmetic surgery. You have a wife? I'll give you the family discount if she wants some work done."

“Nope, no kids, no wife.”

Grant chuckled. “Me, either. Charlotte, we’d better get going,” Grant said with that whiter than white smile. “Bring the flowers. They’re for the table.”

As Grant turned to open the door, Charlotte pointed to the flowers and rolled her eyes at Ben. “I told you!” she mouthed silently.

Ben laughed half-heartedly. “I’ll finish cleaning up here and lock the door behind me,” he said.

“Good to see you again, Ben,” Grant said as he guided Charlotte out of the house with a hand on the small of her back.

“Yeah. Have a good time,” Ben ground out between gritted teeth, even though what he really wanted to say was, *Take your hand off my woman.*

\* \* \* \*

Far from being the psycho, mad doctor Charlotte feared, Grant Garver was charming and attractive. She could see why Kerrie was pushing her toward him so hard. Before the concert, he had the three of them laughing so hard at anecdotes from his medical practice that they started getting dirty looks from the people in the neighboring boxes.

When Grant walked her to her front door at the end of the night, he said, “I had a great time.”

“It was fun.”

“I’d like to see you again.” He stepped closer and brushed his thumb against her cheek.

Luckily, Grant had insisted she take the flowers to enjoy at home. She swooped the bouquet in front of her nose to block any imminent kiss.

“You know, I’ll have to think about it. I’m in a complicated situation that I can’t really explain.”

He cast a sidelong glance at her. “But you’re not engaged.”

“No.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Going steady?”

“No.”

“Then you’re free to marry me. We’ll make it a double wedding. Kerrie and Michael won’t mind.”

Charlotte chuckled and shook her head. “Be serious.”

“It could happen. We could fall madly in love in the next five minutes, have a whirlwind courtship--let’s be generous and say half an hour--and spring the news on your family by midnight.”

“You’re nuts,” she said, meaning it.

“Which is exactly why I’m not in psychiatry.”

Charlotte laughed as he got out his car keys.

“All right,” he conceded, “it’s not going to happen like that, but wait and see. I’ve got two more chances to sweep you off your feet, the rehearsal dinner and the wedding. And at the wedding, I’ll be wearing a tux. And I’m damn hard to resist in a tux.”

## Chapter Six

On the big night, Ben poked his head out of the side door of his detached garage when he heard Charlotte pull up.

"You're early," he said, darting out of the garage and yanking the door shut behind him.

"A little. What's the big secret?" she asked, nodding at the garage.

"It's nothing. Something I'm working on," he said, leading her toward the house. "It's not ready yet."

"What kind of something?" Charlotte grinned. "I know," she said, "it's your Dr. Frankenstein experiments. Or your secret stash of *Magnum, P.I.* memorabilia."

Ben laughed and shook his head. "God, I remember that show! Man, did I want to drive that Ferrari. Hey, come back here!"

He made a grab for her as she tried to sneak past.

"Come on. Just one little peek. I promise I won't tell anyone you're a Magnum-aholic," she said, sidling toward the garage.

"Oh, no you don't," he said, turning her by the shoulders to face the house. "You're not going in there. It's a big mess. I cleaned the rest of the house up for you, but wasn't about to tackle that. There's junk and tools all over. It's a safety hazard."

The truth was, Ben didn't want her to see the fretwork he'd been working on. He wasn't even sure himself why he'd started it in the first place. When he'd begun, it had been as a lark to see if he could design some decent hummingbirds. Then, when he'd drawn something he liked, he thought, what the hell, he'd just carve a little section to see how it looked in execution. That section had turned out so well, that he kept going with it. His personality was such that he couldn't stop a project midstream until it was done.

But now he had yards of custom carved millwork on his hands and no logical explanation he could give Charlotte as to why he'd done it. If she found out, he knew she'd feel obligated to pay him no matter if she liked it or not, and he refused to saddle her with a bill for something she hadn't hired him to do in the first place.

Ben guided her away from the garage toward the door of his small home. "Now, come inside," he said. "I need to get dinner started."

"What are we having?"

"Steak and vegetable kabobs. With pineapple, of course."

"You saved the crown for me, didn't you?" she asked as he opened the door for her.

"Of course. It's in the fridge."

They both went inside and Ben wondered what she thought of his place. He lived in an unsavory part of Reseda, and in spite of the fact that he was in the construction business, his bland gray home was no showplace. His front yard consisted of a plot of grass the size of a pool table with some nondescript bushes under the windows. One overgrown cypress leaned over the roof like a tired soldier. Inside, his décor was contemporary bachelor. In the living room, a Spartan steel and glass shelving unit held his TV

and stereo. He had an aging recliner that he'd scored for ten bucks at a garage sale and a zebra print beanbag chair, which he sometimes sprawled on after a long day's labor.

Charlotte followed him into the galley kitchen where he got out a bottle of wine and opened it.

"So, how was your date with the good doctor?" He tried to sound flippant, as if her answer didn't matter, but damned if he didn't want to know every little detail about that date. After she and Grant had left for the Bowl, Ben had fought the insane urge to follow them forty-five miles to Hollywood so he could spy. Ridiculous ways he could disrupt the date entered his mind like the suggestions of a B-movie director. Sabotage Grant's food with a laxative overdose. Page the good doctor with a false medical emergency. Kidnap the conductor so the concert gets cancelled. He ended up spending the evening frustrated at his lack of options. And now, even though in an hour or so from now Charlotte was going to be naked in his bed, he still felt irritated.

She leaned against the white tile counter. "Oh, it went all right, I guess."

"Did you kiss him?"

Her head came up, as did her brows.

"Sorry," he said quickly. "You don't have to answer that."

She regarded him wordlessly for a moment. He felt a little like a bug under a microscope. "A good night kiss isn't unusual, you know."

"Of course I know that," he grumbled, handing her a glass of wine.

"Are you ... are you jealous?" she asked, taking a sip.

Scowling, he glanced at Charlotte, who had a knowing look on her face.

"All right. Maybe I'm a little unnerved at the thought of Garver and you together. I knew him in high school, remember? He nailed--I mean, went through girls like..." He gestured to the kabobs. "...like you go through pineapple."

Charlotte dipped a finger into her wine. "No one's ever been jealous over me before," she said, licking the drop. "That's very cute."

\* \* \* \*

With a smile, Charlotte wiped her mouth one last time and laid her napkin on the table. Having been hard as a drill bit throughout the meal, Ben struggled to contain his excitement. As usual, he'd been distracted by her hands. For some reason, she had ignored the silverware and used her fingers to eat the bite-sized pieces of meat. Each time she sucked the teriyaki off a fingertip, he wanted to groan. Picturing her doing the same thing to his cock, he'd had to adjust himself more than once during dinner.

He let her clear her dishes, noticing the slight shake in her hands as she picked up the plates, but when he heard her turn on the faucet, he went into the kitchen. No way was he going to wait any longer.

"Charlotte," Ben said as he came up behind her, "Don't worry about the mess. I'll get it later."

"But what about ants? You might get ants if we leave all this stuff out, especially with that sticky teriyaki sauce."

Chuckling, he took the dishwashing liquid out of her hands and placed it on the counter. "Come on, Charlotte. You're not worried, are you?"

Charlotte clenched her hands, not liking how tremulous her voice had just sounded. "Who, me? Nah. My mouth is always as dry as silica."

With a soft murmur, he wrapped his arms around her. His deep voice rumbled in her ear, vibrating through her body all the way down to her toes. "Take it easy. There's nothing to be afraid of. I'll do everything. All you have to do is enjoy."

"I've just never been crazy about jumping into the unknown." Charlotte leaned back into his chest trying to relax, but her heart thumped like a tympani.

He hugged her tighter. "I'll make sure you don't fall," he said softly. "We'll take it nice and easy."

Letting his voice wash over her, she closed her eyes and focused on the feel of his powerful chest against her back as he inhaled and exhaled. Slowly, her tension slipped away.

"That's better," he said. "You're loosening up."

"I'm thinking about pineapple."

She felt his silent chuckle against her back. "That's nice, but I'd rather you thought about what I'm going to do to you, how great I'm going to make you feel."

He pressed his lips against the nape of her neck and she shivered.

"I'm going to make you come all night long, Charlotte. An orgasm for every time you regretted being a virgin."

"I've regretted being a virgin at least fifty times, so..." Charlotte did some quick math. "That's about six O.P.H. I hope you're up to that."

"O.P.H.?"

"Orgasms per hour. Give or take a couple."

"Six O.P.H." Ben buried his face in her hair and again she felt his silent laugh. "You're going to be the death of me," he said, trailing light kisses on her ear.

Desire flickered between her legs. She gripped the edge of the counter as he moved her blouse aside and nibbled his way along her shoulder. Her anxiety had disappeared. All she felt now was breathless anticipation. Slowly, he dragged his fingers up her sides, sending shivers of delight across her skin. Her breasts ached with sweet yearning and when he cupped them, her nipples hardened instantly, thrusting themselves against his palms. He thumbed the sensitive tips, rolling them between his fingers. Her breath came faster and she bit back a moan.

"Does that feel good, Charlotte?"

Right through the thin cotton, he tickled the taut peaks with his fingertips, sending bursts of heat throughout her body to center between her legs. Her breasts swelled in his hands. The pleasure grew so intense that she started making noises she couldn't believe were coming from her.

And she wasn't even naked yet.

Ben came around to face her. Sliding his hands into her hair, he captured her mouth in a deep kiss, his tongue moving slick and wet against hers. This rhythmic, lazy thrusting, the first provocative entry into her body, left her trembling with want. She felt hyper-aware, like the volume on her five senses had been turned all the way up.

Slowly Ben broke the kiss. If it wasn't for the knowledge that more pleasure awaited her in the bedroom, she would have protested. As aroused as she was, she wouldn't have minded doing it here on the dining room table, but Ben took her hand and led her down the hall. Surprised she could even walk a straight line, she followed. Once in the bedroom, she stood there witlessly as he lit some candles and turned down the bed.

"I didn't pack too much other than condoms and a change of clothes," she said when she found her voice. "No special nightgown. That seemed honeymoonish."

Ben smiled at her reassuringly. "You don't need a special nightgown," he said stepping close and slipping a hand around her neck. "It doesn't matter what you're wearing. It doesn't matter what you're doing..."

He bent down and nuzzled her ear, kissing the tender lobe, breathing in deeply, like he wanted to inhale her. She let her head fall to the side as a whispering sigh escaped her lips.

"You turn me on, Charlotte Gibson, and knowing you, you don't believe me. But I'm going to prove it to you tonight. Several times. Over and over and over."

"I know," she murmured dreamily. "All night long."

Charlotte closed her eyes as he kissed her again. He moved his lips over hers, softly exploring. She still couldn't quite believe this was happening. Only a few days ago all she'd had were pathetic pipe-dreams about Ben, and now here he was, promising a night of unparalleled sex, sliding his tongue into her mouth, sending pleasure in slow, steady throbs through her whole body.

She braced her hands on his chest, feeling the hard planes of muscle there. He was so hard, so male.

"God, Charlotte," he groaned against her mouth. "Touch me some more."

"Where?"

"Anywhere."

As he took her mouth again, she slid her hands around and down to his butt and felt him tighten in response. A moment later, she felt his large hands clasp her own bottom, squeezing and kneading. The thick ridge of his erection pressed against her belly, impossibly hot, even through their clothes. She found herself eager to see his penis, to touch it, to feel it deep inside her.

All night long, she thought, starting to pant.

Ben looked down at her, his eyes glowing with banked passion even in the dim candlelight. "I really want to see you naked now."

"Funny you should say that. I was just thinking the same thing."

"Ladies first," he said, with a crooked smile.



“Oh, no. I wouldn’t dream of it. After you.”

“How about a compromise? We’ll take turns. I’ll undress you, and you undress me, one piece at a time.”

She nodded as he reached for the knot on her wrap-around top. He took his time undoing the knot, then the side button, teasing her with a wicked gleam in his eye. Charlotte shrugged the blouse off, anxious to lay her eyes on the muscular chest she’d been feeling up just moments ago, but when he reached for the front clasp of her bra, she stopped him.

"My turn," she reminded him, and he chuckled.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

Charlotte pulled his shirt out of his pants and lifted. He was so tall that she had trouble getting it over his head, and he ended up yanking it off himself.

“Wow,” was all she could say. He looked like an ad for one of those ab workout videos. Each muscle was deliciously defined, rippling under skin with dark, crisp hair that lay in flat whorls. There was definitely something to be said for a man who made his living doing physical labor.

“You’re staring,” he said.

She looked up at his face and saw a bashful, but slightly smug smile. “Oh, you love it.”

“You’ll get yours,” he said, again going for her bra clasp and flicking it open.

Charlotte watched as he splayed his big hands over her ribs and slid them upward under the loose cups of her bra. Her nipples went taut immediately and he wasn’t even touching them. He tortured her by scraping his thumbnails on the underside of her breasts, back and forth, so slowly. She arched her back, thrusting herself toward him, wanting his hands on her, but maddeningly, he bypassed her breasts, catching the bra so he could slide it off her. With a cocky grin, he let the bra dangle from his fingertip before letting it drop to the floor. Charlotte trembled even as she laughed.

“You are so going to get it,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him.

Ben widened his stance and spread his arms wide. “Have at me, baby.”

Taking her bottom lip in her teeth, Charlotte put her hands on her hips and eyed him, wanting to tease him as much as he’d teased her. Deciding that what was good for the goose was good for the gander, she put her hands on his ribs and caressed him, letting her hands glide along the path the hair followed, inward toward the center. She trailed her own thumbnails along the sculpted edge of his pectorals and saw his nipples stiffen up.

She allowed herself a little snicker as he started panting just like she had. Enjoying the sound of his quickened breathing, she tinkered with the button of his jeans before popping it open. He sucked in some air and tensed as she took the tab of the zipper between her thumb and index finger.

She was contemplating pulling it down with her teeth when he blurted, “I love your hands, Charlotte.”

“What?”

He stood there, rigid, his arms at his sides, his fists clenched. “I want you to touch me with your hands. Right now.”

“Really? These hands?” she said, fanning her fingers in front of his face like a magician about to perform a trick.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“Too late.”

After a pointed glance at the distended bulge in his pants, she dragged the zipper down, letting her knuckles brush against him. A ragged groan rumbled out of his chest. She reached down slowly and his gaze followed her hands as she traced one fingertip along the open V of his jeans. He groaned again. She felt the springy hair under his boxers and his flesh was so hot, the heat came right through his underwear. Looking up at him, she splayed her hand over his groin and squeezed.

“Jesus God,” he rasped, “you’re going to make me come in my pants.”

“Would that be so bad?” she asked, rubbing him mercilessly.

He seized her wrist to still her hand. “Yes,” he growled, staring into her eyes. “Because I want to be deep inside you when I come.” He stepped back and yanked his pants off, kicking them to the side of the room.

“Deep...”

He sank to his knees, unsnapped her jeans with a tug.

“Inside.”

He wrenched them down and off her with jerky motions.

“You.”

And before she could protest, he was pulling her panties down too. With something between a laugh and a moan, he pressed his face against her nest of hair, his hands clutching her butt. She gasped as she felt his tongue, hot and thick, snake into the cleft.

“Ben!”

He didn’t look up. His eyes were locked on her mound. “Sorry. Know it was your turn. Couldn’t help it.”

He shuffled forward on his knees, guiding her backward until she felt the bed against the back of her legs.

“Lie back,” he gasped.

His calloused hands on her inner thighs, he coaxed her legs open, inhaling deeply. She shivered, still tense and wondering whether oral sex could possibly be as good as she’d heard it was. Then, without warning his mouth closed over her. She gasped as his flattened tongue slid up in a prolonged, slippery lick. Before the pleasure receded, he did it again. Charlotte arched her back against the velvety sensations.

“God, Ben, that’s incredible. I should have fired you months ago.”

She felt him smile.

“Is that so?”

She patted his head. “Don’t get cocky now. You’re not finished yet.”

“Hey lady, you’re not the boss of me, remember?” he teased, nudging a blunt finger inside her.

That shut her up.

As he bent his head again, resuming his slippery assault, he withdrew his finger and gave her two on the way back in. He rubbed her on the inside, tickling her clitoris with his tongue, teasing it with his lips. He seemed to savor the taste of her, making satisfied noises as he indulged himself between her legs.

Charlotte moaned. She’d never imagined such sweet torture. He explored every crease and crevice with his hungry tongue. He squeezed her buttocks rhythmically as he feasted upon her. Pleasure pulsed through her, slowly at first, like gentle ripples on the surface of a pond, and her hips followed his mouth seeking more and she surrendered to his control. The feelings built until the ripples became surges, stronger and stronger, swelling into waves that threatened to overwhelm her. She writhed in his grasp, clawed at the sheets, wanting that peak, desperate for it.

“Come on, baby,” he coaxed, flexing his fingers inside her, “Let it come.”

Charlotte wound her hands into his hair, rocking toward his mouth with increasingly short little breaths. She dug her heels into the mattress. Ben gorged himself on her as if he was a starving man let loose on a luscious and satisfying feast.

“Ben!” she gasped.

Incredibly, she felt a swift upsurge. Two, three more strokes with his tongue, and she flew. The splendor of the orgasm eclipsed anything she’d ever felt with her own hand. Her body strained toward his as he suckled on her, keeping her poised on that plateau where she was unable to breathe, unable to do anything but feel.

At last, she collapsed, boneless. Tremors of pleasure still vibrated through her, though they dwindled. She felt Ben’s hard breath on her thigh as he ran his hands along her sides, murmuring soft soothing words like she was a skittish filly.

Eyes closed, she felt him rise to his feet, heard the sound of a drawer being opened, a rip of paper, and then a slither as he probably shucked off his boxers.

It was time.

She realized to her surprise that she wasn’t nervous at all. Before, regardless of how far she allowed other men to go, she had always felt anxious and worried, but with Ben, even though he now loomed over her, his thick erection jutting out from his body like a tree branch, she felt only a breathless eagerness. Even if it hurt, she wanted him inside her, sharing his body with her. All that mattered was making that connection with him.

“Charlotte, I need to be inside you now.” His voice came out hoarse. “I’m going to do my damndest not to hurt you, but...”

She cupped his face in her hands as he loomed over her. “Don’t worry. You can’t possibly.”

If he hadn’t been so wound up from her orgasm, Ben might have reveled in her utter trust. As it was, his

dick was so hard if he touched it he thought it might snap off. He closed his eyes against the sight of her naked beneath him, waiting for him, eager to have him sink into her body. When he felt he'd regained control, he nudged his cock against her.

Gasping, he pulled back, panting hard and fighting his way back from the brink. Nope, hadn't waited long enough.

Charlotte's hands fluttered along his arms and shoulders. She rubbed her leg against his hip. "It's okay, Ben."

He tried to smile and didn't think he succeeded. He wanted this to be perfect for her. At the very least, he didn't want to come right off the bat like some know-nothing teenager. That wasn't too much to ask, was it?

With a ragged breath, he moved forward again. She was slippery and swollen, yet so tight. So incredibly wet. The dewy grip she had on his cock as he eased inside wrenched a groan from him, but he maintained. *Jesus God. Don't come, don't come, don't come.*

He focused his attention on her face, watching for--

He froze.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, no," she gasped. "It just stings a little. Keep going."

Ben nodded. Inch by torturous inch, he advanced. He'd never experienced anything so exquisite. On top of the physical sensations, he couldn't stop thinking about how he was the first man to enter her body, the first man to show her what sexual pleasure could be had. It seemed wrong somehow to feel so proprietary, but he couldn't help it.

When at last he was in all the way, groin to mound, he found that the urgency had miraculously left his body. No longer was he on the verge of coming. Instead, he felt a calm sense of control, and when he looked down at her, a mixture of determination and possessiveness. *You're mine now, Charlotte*, came the thought.

And then he began to move.

As he pulled out slowly and slid back inside, the pleasure was incredibly acute, different from anything he'd ever felt. This was heaven on earth for him, but Charlotte seemed stiff beneath him.

"Charlotte, are you okay? Does this feel good?"

"It's getting better every second," she said tightly.

He made a game show buzzing sound. "Not good enough. Hold on."

He lowered his head and kissed her, barely rocking back and forth. After a few moments, Charlotte moaned and shifted her hips to meet his gentle thrusts.

"Good now?" he asked, going a little deeper.

She inhaled deeply and let it out. "Yes, yes. I can't believe it. I want it to go on forever."

He laughed uneasily. “Forever. Right. No pressure.”

She laughed too and drew his head down for another kiss. Their tongues slid against each other. Her breasts pillowed against his chest, and he realized he hadn’t tasted them yet. Later.

Ben stroked long and deep inside her, building her up again. Tonight was all about her pleasure. He couldn’t wait to feel her pulse around him, knowing that it was him sending her over the edge into orgasm. And man, was he ever ready. Every thrust tested his restraint. Her slick, tight passage drove him to move faster and faster, plunging deeply again and again, driving, hammering her. She moaned and hung on, her heels hooking behind his back.

Just when he decided he wasn’t going to make it, she looked up at him and gasped his name.

That did him in.

Plunging into her one last time, his ass clenched, and he exploded like a star going nova. She clutched his back, her legs a vise around his hips. She was coming too, clutching him in a rhythm that mimicked his own throbbing climax. Their sweat-slick bodies were glued together as the last vestiges of sensation dwindled into shimmers and echoes.

He looked down. Jesus God she was beautiful. She still had her eyes closed but had a slack smile on her face as her arms and legs flopped to the mattress. Her flushed skin glistened with perspiration. He nudged his hips against her and she uttered a soft little cry of pleasure.

*Impotent, my ass.*

\* \* \* \*

When Charlotte opened her eyes, Ben was on his side smiling down at her. He was still hot and a little sweaty. To his surprise, she reached over and punched him lightly on the arm.

“Ow!” he said, laughing, “What was that for? Do you always wake up with the urge to assault someone?”

“You let me sleep!” she exclaimed.

He rubbed his arm. “You looked a little done in,” he said with a grin. “Besides, it’s only been about five minutes.”

“I just don’t want to waste any time tonight sleeping,” she said. “Don’t let me sleep anymore.”

Chuckling, Ben said, “No problem. Sleep wasn’t real high on my priority list either. Come here and spoon up. Yeah, like that. I like feeling your ass all soft against me.”

He smoothed a hand over her arm and down to her hand where he let his fingers tangle with hers. He put his cheek next to her ear and she felt his breath against her skin.

“Ben...”

“Hmmm?”

“Was I, you know, okay? You can be honest with me. I know I have a lot to learn.”

Ben gently pressed his fingers against her lips, wondering how the woman could have missed the

mind-blowing orgasm he'd had. The guttural grunts that had erupted from him sounded positively primeval. Still, she was obviously not fishing for compliments.

"Be quiet, Charlotte, and listen to me." He took his hand away from her mouth and hugged her closer. "I don't have the words right now to tell you how you made me feel," he said truthfully. "That was, bar none, the most incredible experience I've ever had."

"So breaking in a virgin does it for you more than grout, huh?"

By now, he was used to her cracking jokes when she was uncomfortable or flustered.

"No, I told you before. You do it for me, Charlotte. You do it for me without even trying."

When she relaxed against him with a sigh, he knew he'd made his point.

## Chapter Seven

The next morning, Charlotte carefully slipped out of bed and headed for the shower. She hadn't realized how sticky she'd feel after a night of non-stop sex.

Still, sticky was a miniscule price to pay. Making love with Ben had been the most amazing experience she'd ever had. She doubted many women could say the same about their first times. If she'd given in when she was much younger, it would probably have been an awkward mating between kids who knew more about passing notes in class than they did about sex.

But Ben was no bumbling teenager. The physical sensations he made her feel ran the gamut. At times, he layered feeling upon feeling, subtle and sublime. At others, her climax was so intense her body did an imitation of the Big Bang, making her feel as if parts of her would be floating through space for millennia.

*But what now?* she wondered as she stepped into the shower. Ben had certainly accomplished his goal, to prove to her that he wasn't sexually dysfunctional, and Charlotte had gotten what she'd wanted, too. She was now a sexually liberated woman, free to enjoy going to bed with whomever she wanted.

Unfortunately, she'd gone to bed with him with the intention of learning how to please men, and what she learned instead was that she only wanted to please one man.

But that was her problem and she'd have to get over it. This was supposed to be a one-time deal, and she wasn't about to embarrass herself--again--by acting as if they were dating and then having to suffer the humiliation of him setting her straight. The very thought of that made her want to put on a disguise and adopt a foreign accent. Oh, no, she was going to play this cool even if it killed her.

The bathroom door opened, and Ben pulled the shower curtain aside with a flourish. All he wore was a boyish grin. Charlotte had to smile back. He was so unbelievably gorgeous, every bit of him powerful muscle, so beautiful that she felt she'd never get tired of looking at him.

"Knock, knock," he said.

"Who's there?"

"Jimmy."

"Jimmy, who?"

"Jimmy a kiss, baby, or I'll die!" He put a hand over his heart and rolled his eyes around.

Laughing, she drew him into the shower with her. He took her into his arms and kissed her, long and deep, as if it had been days since he'd seen her. Charlotte felt his penis throb against her wet skin. Her own body thrummed in response, certain parts of her plumping up in moist anticipation. She still couldn't believe how quickly he could arouse her.

"I knew you'd come in here," she said against his lips.

"You did, did you?" He looked down at her with a lazy smile. Her nipples puckered in response.

"It was inevitable. Me and the grout, we're an irresistible combination."

A bit bolder than she'd been last night, she reached down and stroked him, loving how silky hot he was. Sliding her fingers over the stiff column of masculine flesh, she squeezed and massaged the head,

causing him to suck in a hissing breath.

“God, I love your hands,” he declared, his gaze riveted to her fingers. “I’m serious, Charlotte.”

“You told me that last night.”

“I know it’s weird, but your hands really turn me on. I love watching them. Touch me here again,” he said hoarsely, guiding her hands back downward. “Oh, yeah. Tighter.”

“How’s this?” She put both hands on the shaft and stroked.

Ben nodded, mesmerized by the sight of her slender fingers wrapped around his thick length. Her sliding grip sent pleasure radiating through his body, and he wondered if he could convince her to stay all day and another night. When he thought back to last night, he remembered vividly the look of wonder on her face the second time he’d slid inside her. Her eyes widened in surprise, then gradually darkened with pleasure and awe, like she couldn’t quite believe what he was making her feel. He’d never seen an expression like that on a woman’s face before. It made him feel so filled up inside that he knew he’d do just about anything to see it again, as much as possible.

“Ben?”

Lost in the feeling of her glorious hands on his cock, he murmured absently, “Hmmm?”

“I think I want to go down on you.”

He snapped his gaze to her face. Charlotte wore a shy smile as she knelt down.

“Have you done this before?” he asked, putting his palm against the tile wall as if to steady himself.

“Nope. But I think I should try this, too. I don’t think my sexual ... repertoire would be complete without this.”

“Hell, no.”

“You have to tell me what you like, okay?”

He stared down at her as she angled his prick down and put her lips around the head. He almost cried like a baby, it felt so damn good. The sight of his cock disappearing into her mouth had to be the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. His lungs suddenly didn’t feel large enough. She clearly didn’t know what she was doing, but the fact that she was doing it at all made it incredible. She kissed him. She licked him. She did this funny little thing where she traced the veins with the tip of her tongue. She even accidentally scraped him with her teeth, but it didn’t matter. This was Charlotte. She’d never gone down on a man before in her life, and here she was blowing him with a look on her face that made him feel like a god.

The hot water continued to beat down on them both as she took him in again, deeper. He cupped the side of her face with his hands.

“Jesus God Charlotte, that’s good.”

She pulled back. “Really? It feels good?”

“Oh, baby. Whatever I made you feel last night when I did this to you, this is ten times better. Swear to God.”

She beamed and went back at him with more enthusiasm than before. It took every shred of control he



had not to shift his hips. He discovered he had a fistful of the shower curtain clutched in his hand and his toes were curled against the floor of the tub. The sucking sounds she was making drove him wild.

She fell into a rhythm that matched the beat of his pounding heart. Her lips, slippery and tight, engulfed him--a wet, velvet torture he gladly submitted to. She seemed to sense his growing urgency. Her fingernails dug into his hips, tiny pinpricks of sensation that punctuated the pleasure. The feelings focused in, his groin contracted.

“Charlotte, stop.” Gasping, he pushed her back, and his cock popped out of her mouth, aching at the abrupt loss of sensation. He gripped the head hard to force back the orgasm that hovered there. “Give me a minute.”

Charlotte touched her fingers to her lips, which felt slightly numb. Ben stood under the cascading water. With the steam surrounding him, he looked like a supernatural creature emerging from the mist. His eyes were closed, his face taut with tension. She saw the veins on his neck and temples throbbing. God, she’d made him feel that way, driven him to the brink.

When he opened his eyes, the powerful intensity of his gaze paralyzed her, like she was his prey. Even when he turned around to shut off the water, she didn’t move. She couldn’t.

He thrust back the shower curtain and got out, holding it open for her. The moment she was out of the tub, he swept her up into his arms. Water streamed off their bodies onto the carpet as he strode toward the bed. Her heartbeat spiked as he half-tossed, half-laid her on the mattress. She felt slightly chilled from leaving the shower, but then he fell on her. His naked skin heated her immediately. His big body almost completely covered her.

His mouth found hers. The kiss was hot and hard, his tongue a desperate invasion, battling hers for dominance. He broke away, his hands hungrily squeezing her wet breasts, and then his mouth was on her nipple. Hot, deep pulls made Charlotte arch against him. He nipped the peaks with his teeth, sending sharp stabs of pleasure through her, and she cried out softly with each little bite. Her body burned for him. She wanted him inside her, his hard shaft filling her, completing that connection between them.

Mumbling something against her neck, he groped between her legs. She was slick with passion and he groaned. He drew away to roll on protection, then returned to hover over her. His hair was plastered against his forehead, wet still from the shower. Trapping her gaze with his, he pushed inside, a strong thrust, filling her in an instant and sending a rush of pleasure to every nerve. Immediately, he pulled back and impaled her again. This time he didn’t coax her along. He didn’t ply her with gentle arousing kisses, building up slowly and carefully. This time was all about satisfaction, now, as quickly as possible. He thrust hard and fast. When the blast came, it seized them both. Ben shouted, shuddering against her, and Charlotte dug her fingers into his straining upper arms.

After a moment, Ben gave her a long, dreamy kiss that sent echoes rippling through her like the last notes of a concerto.

“I’m crushing you,” he muttered, gently withdrawing and rolling off.

Ben turned and rid himself of the condom, disposing of it in a tissue. He then returned to lie on his side, his head propped up on one hand. He brushed the wet hair out of Charlotte’s flushed face, admiring how satisfied she looked.

“Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?” she mumbled, eyes closed, lips slack and swollen from his kisses.

“Muffin.”

“Muffin who?”

“Muffin the matter with me. I just had the best damn sex of my life.”

She chuckled. “You and your knock knock jokes.”

“The sheets are soaked,” he murmured against her temple.

“That’s what happens when you don’t dry off after the shower.”

“I like you wet, Charlotte,” he said, toying with one of her nipples. “Stay with me. It’s Saturday. Stay all weekend. I have plenty of food. We won’t have to leave the house. You don’t even have to leave the room. I’ll bring the food to you in bed.”

She had an odd expression on her face, but before he could figure out what it meant, she looked away.

“I can’t,” she said.

Ben’s disappointment was surprisingly acute. “Scoot over here and spoon up. Why not?”

“I have Kerrie’s rehearsal dinner tonight at five.”

Ben scowled at the thought of Charlotte spending more time with Good Time Grant, the erudite doctor who liked classical music and drove a goddamn Audi A4 convertible. Before he could stop himself he said, “Skip it.”

“I’m her sister and the maid of honor. It’s mandatory. I swear, if I ever get married, I’m going to elope. Planning a wedding is like putting on a Broadway show.”

“Then come over after.” Yeah, that sounded good. He started getting hard just thinking about another night of sliding between the sheets with her.

Charlotte shifted in his arms and looked up at him, again with the weird expression. “For sex,” she said.

With a chuckle, he nuzzled her neck. “No, for a rousing game of chess. Of course, for sex.” He pressed up against her, sliding his hands around her waist. “You had a good time last night, didn’t you? Let’s beef up your repertoire some more.”

Her answer was so long in coming, he started to worry, but at last she said, “All right.” Sighing, she added, “I might be late though.”

“I don’t mind waiting.”

But he did mind the fact that she seemed less than enthusiastic about seeing him again. He’d have to do something about that.

\* \* \* \*

“Charlotte, it’s about time you got here,” her mother exclaimed when she arrived at her parents’ house. She hurried her into the living room where everyone had already gathered.

“I’m sorry I’m late.”

Charlotte felt a twinge of guilt. Ben had wanted to kiss her goodbye.

For fifteen minutes.

She sincerely hoped no one could tell she’d had a quickie only half an hour ago.

“We were beginning to think you forgot,” Kerrie said.

“Come on. Would I forget something as important as this?”

At her family’s raised brows, Charlotte quickly said, “Don’t answer that.”

Grant greeted her with a peck on the cheek, like they were old friends. “Good to see you again, Charlotte.”

“Hi, Grant.”

Michael introduced the other ushers and his immediate family. Then the entire group trudged out to the patio.

The flagstone curved out into an expanse of lawn that led to a tennis court to the left and an infinity pool. To the right was a fully equipped outdoor kitchen even though her mother wasn’t all that fond of cooking.

“Now, that’s what I call a view,” Grant exclaimed with an appreciative whistle. “I think I can see Colorado.”

As she led the way to a classic white gazebo, Charlotte’s mother beamed. “Thank you. The minute I walked into this house sixteen years ago, I knew it was home for us. In fact…”

Charlotte caught Kerrie’s eye and they both bit back smiles. They knew what was coming.

“I knew that someday my little girls would get married, and this gazebo seemed like the perfect place. See how the valley is spread out there? It’s like the world is set at their feet as they embark on their new lives with their husbands.” Charlotte’s mother fluttered her hands about her face and blinked rapidly. “Oh, look at me. I’m getting weepy. Let’s get on with the rehearsal before I start bawling.”

They practiced the ceremony twice. Charlotte fidgeted, anxious to return to Ben. Looking out at the view, she pictured him in his house waiting for her. Naked on his blue sheets like the main course.

Unfortunately, the caterers Michael’s parents had hired for the occasion were late getting the food on the table, and the group of young people passed the time in the game room. Kerrie showed the girls brochures from the honeymoon cruise she and Michael had booked. Having already seen those umpteen times, Charlotte wandered over to the pool table where the men were organizing a game.

“This is pretty sad. No one’s going to take me on?” Grant was saying, chalking a cue.

“Not for fifty bucks,” one of Michael’s friends replied.

“Bunch of chickenshits.”

“I’ll play for twenty,” Charlotte said, wanting something to take her mind off the waiting. “Straight

pool?”

“Yeah,” Grant said, a gleam in his eye.

Michael pulled some balls out of one of the pockets. “Since you’re going to be my sister-in-law in about twenty four hours, I’m obligated to warn you this guy is pretty good. And he’s very competitive.”

Grant leaned nonchalantly against the table, a cool smirk on his lips.

“Well, I’m not too bad myself,” she replied. “This is my father’s table, after all.”

Kerrie piped up from the other side of the room. “That’s right. Charlotte might just kick your butt, Grant.”

“I welcome the challenge,” he said, sweeping into an exaggerated bow. “In fact, I’ll even let the little lady break.”

“Little lady, my ass. I’ve got ten that says Charlotte’ll take him,” Kerrie said.

That started a blizzard of other bets, most of the women siding with Charlotte. Kerrie’s old time friend Nicolette was the one hold out from feminine solidarity. Charlotte had never seen why Kerrie had become such good friends with her. They were complete opposites. Kerrie had protected her chastity zealously, whereas Nicolette handed out blowjobs like Halloween candy. Kerrie was kind and considerate; Nicolette tended toward acidic sarcasm and criticism.

“Prepare to lose your money, ladies,” Grant said, sweeping his cue at the observers.

“Come on, Charlotte! You can beat him,” said Lindy, one of the bridesmaids. “I’ve seen you play, and you’re like the Muhammad Ali of pool. I swear, she vacuums the table all clean of balls.”

Nicolette scoffed. “Honestly, Lindy, it’s ‘swept the table.’”

Lindy shrugged. “Swept, vacuumed, whatever.”

Trying to appear confident, Charlotte sauntered to the end of the table and lined up her shot. With the girls’ money riding on her, she was feeling the pressure to win. Luckily, she made a clean break.

“I’ll take stripes,” she said, lining up her cue. “Nine ball in the corner pocket.”

To her relief she got two more before putting a little too much topspin on the cue ball, leaving Grant with an easy shot.

“Ooh, look at that,” Nicolette said with glee.

Grant smiled. “Thank you very much, Charlotte. Two ball in the side pocket.”

Thunk. Grant made the shot easily, and the men hooted their approval. Nicolette clapped as Grant took a bow. Unfortunately for him, he missed his next shot. Kerrie snickered.

“Damn it,” he cursed.

Charlotte frowned at the lack of a clear shot. She tried to bank one but missed.

Lindy and Kerrie giggled about something as Grant circled and studied the table. He frowned at them, then tried to get the three ball in, but it careened off one of Charlotte’s balls, knocking it into a pocket.

Charlotte suppressed her smile. On her turn, she got the ten in, but missed the eleven. Then Grant had an incredible run, pocketing all his balls but number seven.

“Nice shooting,” Charlotte said, feeling tense.

Grant didn’t reply. His arrogance had dissipated. Making the seven would be tough. He seemed very intent and when some more giggling burst out, he turned to the onlookers and said tightly, “You know, I’d appreciate a little quiet here. I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Okay, everyone,” one of Kerrie’s friends said, her voice slightly mocking, “Grant needs complete silence. No rustling, no movement of any kind. Not even breathing.”

“Seven ball in the corner,” said Grant, closing one eye.

Charlotte did hold her breath as he took his shot. And missed.

“Goddamn it!” he swore.

“Ooh, he buckles under the pressure!” Kerrie snickered.

Michael nudged Kerrie gently and whispered something, at which Kerrie rolled her eyes.

“Take it easy,” Charlotte said. “It’s only a game.”

Grant nodded stiffly, his hand gripping the cue. “Your shot.”

“I warned you he was competitive,” Michael said with a laugh. “It doesn’t matter what he’s playing, he plays all out.”

“So do I,” Charlotte said. Especially when other people’s money was at stake.

Luckily for the ladies, on Charlotte’s next turn she swept the table, leaving Grant’s seven ball sitting on the felt. As the black eight ball dropped into the leather pouch, the women squealed, crowing over Charlotte’s victory as if she had won a professional billiards tournament. Grant busied himself pulling the balls out of the pockets.

“Best two out of three,” he growled.

“No more pool,” Charlotte’s mother said as she came into the room. “Dinner has arrived.”

“After dinner, then,” Grant said, replacing his cue in the rack. “I feel like I’m really warmed up now, and I was watching you, analyzing your style.”

Charlotte shook her head. “No, I can’t stay after dinner.”

She started down the stairs, eager to eat and get out of there. Ben was waiting for her.

Grant dogged her steps. “Come on, Charlotte, give me another chance. Scared I’ll beat you this time?”

Charlotte gave him a look. “Please. I have plans. You should challenge Kerrie. She’ll clean your clock even faster than I did.”

“I’ll play you, Grant,” Nicolette said.

And Charlotte thought that was a wonderful idea.

## Chapter Eight

Charlotte left her parents' house as soon as politely possible. As she got into her car she noticed the wind had picked up, and by the time she pulled up at Ben's house it was gusty enough to plaster her hair against her head. The good old Santa Ana winds came without fail to Southern California every year, drying the brush, lowering humidity, and overall creating the perfect atmosphere for wild fires. Not to mention criminally dry skin and hair with so much static electricity it could power the Eastern seaboard.

When Ben opened the door for her, she felt like she was being blown inside his house.

"Whoa!" he said, chuckling. "Wind picked up, didn't it? Sure hope you don't have allergies."

Once she was inside, he pulled her close and kissed her. Charlotte felt as if it had been days since they'd seen each other and not a mere five hours. As he lazily explored her mouth with his tongue, he slid his hands over her bottom, and she returned the favor. She was puzzled when she felt a hard rectangular item in his back pocket, but didn't bother to try to figure out what it was. His kisses left her unable to think of much else besides how quickly they could get undressed.

Finally, he groaned and broke the kiss to rub his cheek against hers.

"Knock, knock," he said softly into her hair.

"Who's there?"

Ben's lips cruised along her neck, sending shivers up and down her spine.

"Juana."

"Juana, who?" He nibbled her earlobe and Charlotte panted a little harder.

"Juana go into the bedroom and see if I can make six O.P.H.?"

He looked at her so earnestly that Charlotte wanted to blurt out that she was willing to go for the Guinness World Record for orgasms if he was game, but unfortunately she had to leave early tomorrow to help Kerrie get ready for the wedding. She really should be sleeping now so she didn't have circles under her eyes. But, then again, she reasoned, that's why God created make-up.

"I don't want to seem ungrateful, but maybe we could keep it down to three because I have to leave early tomorrow."

"Oh, that's right. The wedding."

"Yes, the wedding."

He cocked his head at her. "You're sure you can't call and say you've come down with the measles?"

"Ben!"

"No, you're right. Measles isn't serious enough. How about scurvy? I don't know what the hell that is, but if pirates didn't want to get it, it had to be pretty bad."

She laughed. "I'm going to the wedding, Ben, and that's that. All you're doing is wasting time, time we could be spending in bed."

“When the lady’s right, she’s right. We’d better get started.”

He smiled down at her then and his eyes sparkled, but strangely, not with passion. Charlotte was trying to figure out what was going on when he pulled the mystery item out of his back pocket. It was a small, slim book.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“A surprise. I want you to wait here a minute and don’t read the note until I say it’s okay.”

He waited for her nod before handing her the book and then bounding away like a huge frisky puppy. Bursting with curiosity, but determined to keep her word, she waited until he called out from his bedroom, “Okay. You can start.”

Charlotte examined the book, surprised to find that it belonged to her. *The Victorian Language of Flowers*. She hadn’t even noticed it missing from her shelves. A sticky note adorned the cover. In Ben’s small, precise printing it said, “I may not have been with you the other night listening to your favorite composer, but I was thinking about you. I hope that counts for something.”

Smiling at his spelling error, she called out, “It definitely counts!”

She heard a distant, “Yes!” and chuckled to herself.

He was so cute when he wrote things. His forehead got all creased with wrinkles and he gripped the pencil like he was taking the bar exam, even if he was only writing down his phone number. She suspected he had some sort of learning disability, not that it mattered.

“What now?” she called.

“Watch where you walk.”

“Watch where I...?”

That’s when she noticed a flower pot on the floor a few steps away. There were two kinds of plants, one with a cluster of cascading blossoms shaped like tiny, almost translucent, teacups. The other had narrow trumpet-like flowers.

Warmth filled her. She had talked with Ben once about how people in the Victorian times used to communicate their feelings for each other with flowers. He’d obviously remembered that.

Eager to see what his secret message was, Charlotte peered at the plastic marker and then scanned the index of the book. Coventry bells and justicia ... female perfection and neglected beauty. With a sigh of contentment, Charlotte picked up the pot. She knew the exact spot in her garden where she would plant it. She hurried to join Ben in the bedroom, eager to show her appreciation of his thoughtful gift.

“Oh, Ben, I...”

She broke off when she noticed more flowering plants. In fact, several pots, leading all the way down the hall. Knowing she wouldn’t be able to juggle all of them, she put the first plant down. Reading from the book again, she saw that bluebottles meant delicacy. *He thinks I’m delicate*, she thought dreamily. Daisies communicated beauty and innocence. Violets meant she occupied his thoughts. Celandine, tuberose--joys to come and dangerous pleasures.

Charlotte almost couldn’t wait until tomorrow so she could brag to Kerrie, who had thought that Grant’s

store bought centerpiece deserved high marks.

A sigh escaped her as she reached the door of Ben's bedroom and looked inside. Just like she'd imagined when she was watching Kerrie and Michael pretend to light the unity candle for the second time, Ben lay in bed, the covers thrown back to reveal his magnificent naked body. He held a gorgeous purple iris in his hand. Warm light from a few candles cast a copper glow on his skin. Suddenly she understood why Michelangelo thought so highly of the male nude.

Of course, Michelangelo never carved a statue with a boner.

"What does the iris mean?" she asked as she sat on the edge of the bed.

"It means that I burn for you."

Charlotte licked her lips, incredibly turned on already when he'd hardly even touched her. Truth be told, she'd been aroused all evening, just anticipating making love with him again.

"I'm pretty hot for you too," she said.

"Then let's get you out of these clothes." He laid the iris on the pillow and smiled at her. "You know, so you'll be cooler."

Charlotte had no objections to that and moments later she was naked too. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her again, fanning the heat of her desire instead of cooling it. As his rough hands roved over her skin, she tried to forget that they weren't dating. She also tried to convince herself that people did this all the time--had sex just for the sake of sex. But was that what this was? Did a man who just wanted sexual release go to the kind of trouble that Ben had with the flowers?

Then his mouth clamped onto her nipple and all serious thought was left behind. She forgot everything but the flare of fire that streaked through her as he pulled the tip into his mouth, sucking and licking her until her entire breast throbbed. When he moved to the other and gave it the same attention, Charlotte held onto his head and arched up. His tongue flicked her over and over while his hand snaked down her belly. Yes, yes. She wanted his touch there. Parting her legs and lifting her hips, she gasped when his thick finger delved between.

"Charlotte, you're so wet."

She winced. "I know. It's a little embarrassing."

"No, it's not," he said, stroking her there idly. "It's a big turn on, to know that I do this to you."

His touch was so softly rhythmic, she felt hypnotized. She drifted on a raft of sensation, guided only by his sleepy, almost careless caresses. She took a deep breath and sighed with contentment.

"You know what turns me on?" she asked, eyes closed.

"I like to think I do," he murmured in a low voice, "but I wouldn't mind hearing your answer."

"I like it when you talk to me."

"Talk to you?" His fingertips glided along her folds teasingly. "Like when I said you were wet just now? A little dirty like that?"

"Yes..." Charlotte drew another languorous breath as fingers started a circular motion just where she



liked it. “Yes, oooh, just ... like ... that.”

She kept her eyes shut as he began a low litany of words, punctuating his murmurings with nuzzling and kisses. He continued stroking her with slippery fingers, each gliding touch sending provocative waves of longing through her.

“You’re so soft here, Charlotte. Like a very, very finely sanded piece of wood. You know how that feels? Velvety and soft?”

While being compared to a hunk of lumber may not have been flattering to most women, Charlotte knew what he was talking about. Keeping her eyes closed, she gave him a feline smile. “Mmmm,” she murmured, “a certain part of you feels like that to me too.”

A hiss of satisfaction escaped her when he slid a finger inside her. He was taking things so slowly that she wondered if he was going to make foreplay last all night. Then, as he began to nudge his finger in and out in a maddening way, sending the most luxurious sensations meandering through her, she decided she didn’t care if she got a lick of sleep at all.

“That feel good, Charlotte? You like that? How about two fingers then?”

Charlotte arched as he filled her even more. “Yes, yes, I like that,” she gasped. His mouth found her nipple again forcing a moan from her throat. This meant he had to stop talking, but she didn’t much care now. He suckled, flicked and nibbled her until she writhed with need, her hands clutched in his hair, keeping his mouth where she wanted it.

The simultaneous pleasures from her breasts and down below rolled through her and expanded. He shifted downward, insinuating his face between her thighs. Already on the verge of an incredible orgasm, Charlotte moaned and lifted her hips. Ben’s slippery tongue, his lips, his hot breath drove her quickly all the way to the edge and over. As she peaked, she uttered short repetitive cries of satisfaction. Ben stayed with her, flexing his fingers deep inside, compelling her toward even higher levels of ecstasy.

When she finally settled, flickers of pleasure remained, making her feel as if she was giving off intermittent sparks like a live wire. Ben sheathed himself with a condom and moved up. His half-lidded gaze sent fresh anticipation zipping through her. Suddenly, she felt recharged, eager and desperate even so soon after coming.

“I want you...” she gasped.

Supporting his weight on his arms, Ben shifted his hips. When she felt his erection nudging between her legs, it was all she could do not to squirm.

He looked down and captured her gaze. His eyes burned into hers as he said, “You’re mine,” and pushed slowly inside.

Charlotte didn’t reply, knowing he didn’t mean it the way she wanted him to. As before, the exquisite sensation of his hard shaft filling her was almost more than she could bear. It was as if by joining their bodies he could bypass all of her barriers, her fears, her doubt, to find the deepest essence of her.

He kissed her deeply as he moved inside her, his tempo again slow and indulgent. Their tongues slid against each other, sharpening the hunger, driving them toward the inevitable.

“Look at me, Charlotte. I want to see your eyes when you come this time.”

Charlotte lifted her eyes to his as he stroked in and out, the tempo growing more insistent, more needy. Roughly, he drove into her again and again, demanding something she couldn't quite identify but was more than willing to give. In fact, she was willing to give him everything, everything she was and ever would be.

She loved him.

The realization had tears pricking her eyes, and she blinked and looked away.

Ben frowned, losing his rhythm.

“What’s wrong, Charlotte?” he gasped, stopping.

“Nothing. Nothing, Ben. It just feels so good. Don’t stop.”

She pulled his head down for a kiss, sweeping her tongue into his mouth, trying to distract him from the love that must have been shining plainly on her face.

“I don’t want you to ever stop,” she said against his lips.

Nodding, he reached back and levered one of her legs up. Charlotte gasped at the new sensations. Each time he plunged inside, she felt a sharp stab of raw pleasure. Faster and faster, harder, deeper. Charlotte’s head reeled. All she could do was hold on to his shoulders as he pounded her.

“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus...” he chanted. “God, baby. Now, now...”

Ben slammed into her one more time and Charlotte let go. Dimly aware of his hoarse grunt as he shuddered through his orgasm, she burst out of the atmosphere to float free of gravity and everything earthly and normal.

Eventually she drifted back down. Awareness of her surroundings returned. Ben’s limp body covered her, but he kept one elbow bent, taking some of his considerable weight on his arm. He gasped for breath still, as did she.

She loved this man. She loved the way he made her feel. She loved his honesty, his work ethic, his thoughtfulness, and even his silly knock-knock jokes. But if she confessed her love and he didn’t reciprocate ... no. Her original decision to keep it casual was the best course. Take it one day at a time. It wasn’t likely he’d ever fall in love with a plain Jane like her, but stranger things had happened.

## Chapter Nine

Charlotte woke later that night to the phone ringing. Groggy, she reached for the receiver.

“Hello?”

There was a brief pause.

“Charlotte?” It was Kerrie.

Charlotte squinted at the clock. What could her sister possibly want at two a.m. in the morning, a little over fifteen hours before her wedding?

“Charlotte, what are you doing at Ben’s house?” Kerrie asked. Her voice sounded strange.

Too late, Charlotte realized she'd answered Ben's phone.

"Well, I was sleeping..." she said, cranky and groggy. "What are you doing calling him at two in the morning?"

“Oh, Charlotte, something terrible happened.”

Charlotte was alarmed to hear Kerrie’s voice catch. Wild thoughts careened through her sleep-muddled head. Behind her, Ben stirred.

“Did something happen to Mom or Dad?”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. I need to know if Ben does emergency construction. See, I couldn’t sleep because of the wind, and there was this huge crash, and when I went to look, I saw a branch from the tree in the Goldberg’s yard had fallen onto the gazebo! Charlotte, the roof is crushed, and the side is a mess, and my wedding is going to be ruined! Please, please, make Ben come. Michael’s on his way. Dad’ll help too. But we need someone who knows which end of the hammer to use!”

Kerrie’s panicked voice jerked Charlotte into complete wakefulness. “Don’t worry, sis. We’ll be right there. Your wedding won’t be ruined. I promise.”

By that time, Ben had woken. He scooted over, his face concerned. “What’s going on?”

After Charlotte filled him in, he nodded, threw back the covers, and started getting dressed.

\* \* \* \*

When Charlotte and Ben got to her parents’ house, it was chaos. The wind was still gusting hard. Her dad, the antithesis of a handyman, was in the garage gathering what meager tools he had. Michael had his hands full trying to soothe Kerrie and her mom, who were both blubbing that this was the worst wedding disaster ever visited upon their family, topping even the bumblebee that got caught under Cousin Renee’s veil, stinging her lips and making them swell up like water wings.

Charlotte’s heart filled with pride when Ben stepped in and took charge. Her dad thought they should level the structure completely and lay sod to cover the bare patch. Her mother went berserk at the idea of razing her sacred gazebo.

“When are the guests supposed to arrive?” asked Ben.

“Five o’clock,” her mother answered. “But the florists will be here to decorate it at three.”

Ben nodded matter-of-factly. “No problem. It might be tight, but I think we can get this done.”

Kerrie sniffled, her eyes swollen, her nose red-rimmed from blowing it. She sat on the low wall dividing the pool from the raised gazebo terrace. “Really? You can really fix this?”

Ben swept his high-powered flashlight over the damage again. A huge branch had wedged itself into the roof and railing of the structure.

“Yeah,” he said to Kerrie. “I can. Your wedding will go on as planned. I promise.”

Ben went into work mode. He got her dad and Michael unloading supplies from the truck. He started Kerrie and her mother working on brewing coffee and fixing food. Once the meager floodlight was in place, he positioned himself on the roof of the gazebo and attacked the branch, sawing off hunks and letting the other two men haul away the debris. Charlotte pitched in where she could but spent most of her time worrying. In the inadequate light and still gusty wind, Ben could easily miscalculate and lose his footing. Or the power saw could go wild, and they would have a much more horrible disaster than the one they faced now. With visions from that chainsaw massacre movie assailing her, she called out “Be careful!” about every five minutes.

The arrival of daylight saw an increase in the work pace. The branch and broken bits of gazebo had been removed, and Ben was finally able to get an accurate idea of what still had to be done.

“Where’s the nearest home improvement store?” Ben asked. “We’ll need to get some supplies. We have to match this paint color.” He shoved some of the damaged wood into his pocket. “We’ll need a panel of lattice for this side here...”

Ben whipped out his tape measure and was in the midst of checking the dimensions of the missing lattice when her father offered him a pen and pad of paper.

“Use this. That way you won’t forget anything.”

Ben hesitated, a deep frown darkening his brow. “Yeah, okay,” he said, taking the items from her father. “That’s a good idea.”

His lips tight, he gripped the pen.

Not really knowing why she did it, Charlotte said, “Why don’t you just dictate what you need to me. I’ll write it down.”

Looking relieved, Ben nodded and rattled off a list of supplies. Afterward they wolfed down some breakfast, then the two of them headed for Home Depot. As they waited at a traffic light, Ben cleared his throat.

“Er, thanks for making that list for me.”

“You’re welcome. I know you don’t like to write stuff down.”

“Yeah, well, it’s always been sort of a problem for me.” He gave a half-hearted laugh. “My brain just can’t get my hand to work right when it comes to writing.”

He stared straight ahead keeping his eyes on the road, and Charlotte sensed this wasn’t something he

shared easily.

“And I couldn’t hit a nail without bending it to save my life,” she said earnestly. “Listen, you’ve built a strong business, in spite of whatever problem you have with writing. That’s something to be proud of.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he replied.

Charlotte was relieved to see his mouth turn up slightly at the corners. He cleared his throat again.

“Speaking of my business, I’d better call some of my guys to come help.”

Work on the gazebo resumed shortly after nine when three of Ben’s best freelancers, Manuel, Jake, and Alberto arrived, glad for the work with time and a half wages. Grant and the other ushers showed up to help too, and suddenly Ben had an overabundance of men. His regulars got right to work, with a minimum of direction. Michael and his friends, however, were another story. They tried to help out, but succeeded mostly in getting in the way.

Eventually, Ben said to them, “You know, guys, thanks for the help, but we’ve got it under control now.”

Michael smiled in relief. “Yeah, let’s leave it to the professionals.”

The male half of the wedding party wandered back to the house, but an hour later, Grant returned, much to Ben’s annoyance. He stood around and watched for a while and Ben ignored him, but eventually he started making suggestions as if he was a consultant they’d hired.

After about half an hour of this, Ben couldn’t take it anymore. Even though they were on the home stretch, he had to say something or explode.

“Grant, old buddy, we’re almost done. I’d really appreciate it if you stopped second guessing me.”

Grant seemed surprised. “I’m not second-guessing you. I’m just offering options.”

“Look.” Ben slid his hammer into the loop of his tool belt, mainly so he wouldn’t be tempted to conk Grant over the head with it. “I have a contractor’s license. I’ve been in this business for ten years. I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m sure you do, but it never hurts to look at something from different sides.”

“Well, let me know the next time you’re in the office, and I’ll be happy to come in and offer your patients some ‘options’ on what schnoz they should be buying.”

Grant stiffened. “Hold on just a damn minute. You can’t possibly be comparing a medical degree with a contractor’s license, can you? I mean, you of all people.”

Ben’s jaw clenched and he felt his face turn red. Michael started to walk toward them from where he’d been filling the paint gun.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ben demanded.

“I mean, I don’t recall...”

Before Grant could say another word, Michael stepped between them.

“Hey, guys, settle down,” he said, his hands up like a traffic cop’s. “Come on now. Let’s not have any

trouble.”

With great difficulty, Ben reined in his anger. There was nothing he would have liked better than to plow his fist into Grant’s autocratic nose, but in just a few hours, there was going to be a wedding here, and Charlotte would never forgive him for causing a scene, not after they’d overcome the gazebo disaster.

He let Michael pull him aside.

“I’m okay,” Ben said. “I overreacted.”

Michael went on in a calm voice. “Perfectly understandable. We’ve all be under a lot of pressure here and we’re bound to be a little on edge. Especially you, Ben. You’ve been here practically all night.”

“Yeah, I am a little tired,” he admitted. He was actually exhausted from being up all night, half of it making love to Charlotte, the other half here, fighting the wind and trying to work in the dark without amputating a limb.

Michael clapped a hand on his shoulder. “I really appreciate all the hard work you’ve done. Kerrie’s and Mom’s hearts would have been broken if we couldn’t get married under this…” he lowered his voice “goddamn holy gazebo.”

Ben chuckled. They’d all heard countless times today about how important this structure was to Mrs. Gibson.

“But unless I’m wrong, about all that’s left is the painting, and you can probably handle that yourself, right?”

Ben nodded. “Yeah. The wind’s died down, thank God. Manny and I will finish the shingles and get a layer of paint on this thing no problem now. Jess and Alberto will clean up the staging area and put everything away. We’ll be out of here just when the florists get here.”

“Great. Grant and I will let you work. I know I need a shower. We all do. The photographers will be here soon, and Kerrie’ll have my head if we’re not shiny and clean the nanosecond they arrive.”

\* \* \* \*

In Kerrie’s room, Marti the hairdresser was fussing over the bride’s coiffure one last time. The bridesmaids had gone to fetch the bouquets. Kerrie sat at her mirrored vanity, looking like something out of a bridal magazine. *As well she should*, Charlotte mused. Three hours of preparation time should have been enough to make anyone into a cover girl. There wasn’t an inch of Kerrie that hadn’t been waxed, moisturized, made-up, or curled.

“We’ll be lucky if the EPA doesn’t slap us with a violation,” Charlotte said, coughing at the cloud of hairspray. She waved a hand around Kerrie’s head. “I’m sure we’ve doubled the hole in the ozone layer today.”

Kerrie leaned away from Charlotte. “Be careful! You’ll mess it up!”

Charlotte poked a finger at a curl. It didn’t budge. “Please, Kerr. A nuclear explosion couldn’t mess this up.”

“We have to be ready in case the wind picks up again,” Marti said, blasting it with one last spray. “You can never trust the weather.”

“Thanks again, Marti,” Kerrie said, beaming. “You did a spectacular job.”

After Marti had gone, Charlotte stood behind Kerrie at the vanity and looked at her reflection in the mirror.

“I can’t believe how beautiful you look. Even in that Valhalla bra thing you’ve got on. And that slip. People could use that as a life raft.”

“No they couldn’t. It weighs a ton.” Kerrie glanced toward her canopy bed where her multi-layered tulle slip stood independently, like a hut. “It doesn’t really matter anyway. Michael’s not going to see this stuff. I’m going to wear that negligee Nicolette gave me, remember?”

Charlotte wrinkled her nose and poked a stiff curl again, just for the fun of it. She wondered absently how many pounds of pressure per square inch it could withstand before buckling.

“I know you thought the nightgown was slutty,” Kerrie said, “but I decided that my virginity would sort of cancel out the slut factor. I think it’ll just drive Michael mad, and I’ll probably be wearing it all of two seconds anyway.”

“No, I don’t think so. Michael knows it’s your first time. He’s going to take it slow.”

Kerrie met Charlotte’s eye in the mirror. “You sound like you speak from experience.”

Charlotte shook her head slightly and walked away from the vanity.

“Did you and Ben really make love?”

“Oh, it’s make love, now, is it?”

Kerrie sighed. “Okay, I deserve that. I admit that I misjudged him. I said some mean things about him, too, that I’m sorry I said. He’s a really, really nice guy. My wedding would have been ruined if it wasn’t for him.”

“Apology accepted,” Charlotte said with a nod.

“So, did you? Sleep with him?”

Charlotte took a deep breath. “Yes. We made love, and it was the most incredible experience I’ve ever had.”

“I hear a ‘but’ in there somewhere.” Kerrie turned on her padded stool to face Charlotte.

“But, it was too incredible. Do you know what I mean?”

“No.”

“I just can’t figure out what to do,” Charlotte explained. “I don’t know how he feels about me or what he wants to do now. Are we a couple now, or was it just a fling for him? When I tell you what he did for me last night, I think...”

At that moment, a gaggle of girls burst into the room bearing two large boxes of flowers.

“Kerrie, the bouquets are here!” one of the bridesmaids exclaimed.

Kerrie jumped to her feet. “Oh, they’re beautiful, but they won’t stay that way here on my bed. Bring

them to the refrigerator and then go check with the photographer and see how much longer I have to get ready.”

When the sisters alone again, Kerrie sat down on the bed again. “Now, tell me what’s going on,” she said. “What happened last night?”

“I fell in love with him,” Charlotte blurted.

Kerrie’s eyes got about as big as petri dishes. “You said he did something for you last night. Just what in the heck did he do?”

Charlotte explained about the flowers.

“Charlotte, that’s extremely romantic, but you can’t fall in love with a guy because he gives you flowers.”

“I know that. That was just the catalyst. I think I’ve been in love with him a long time. I just don’t know how he feels about me.”

“That’s the age old question. If we were still in high school, I could get one of the girls to go ask him.”

Charlotte whirled around and nailed Kerrie with a hard look. “Don’t you dare. Besides,” she said with a sigh, “he’s probably gone by now.”

“What does your heart tell you? Do you think it’s just sex for him?”

“My heart’s afraid to even hypothesize.”

Charlotte wanted to flop down onto the bed and stare at the ceiling, but she didn’t want to wrinkle her dress, so she kicked off her heels and paced.

“I thought I could keep this strictly physical, and that my feelings for him were just lust.”

“That’s easy to understand. The guy inspires lust. That’s for sure. But look what he did for you today.”

Charlotte wrung her hands. “But did he do it for me? I don’t know. After you called, I told him what happened with the gazebo, and there was no question about whether or not he was going to come. He didn’t hesitate for even a moment. But then again, the man’s a workaholic like Dad. He’s very serious about his business and this could have been just another job.”

There was a knock at the door. Lindy, one of the bridesmaids poked her head in. “The photographer says fifteen more minutes.”

“Okay. Thanks. Hey, Lindy, wait a sec. Is Ben still here?”

“Ben?”

“The construction guy.”

“Oh! Him. Yeah, I saw him sitting outside. I think he’s trying to write up an invoice, but Nicolette is hitting on him.”

“What?” Charlotte rushed to the window and looked down into the backyard. “Where are they?”

No matter which way she craned her neck, she couldn’t see Ben or Nicolette. “Where are they, Lindy?”



“By the barbeque.”

That explained it. Kerrie’s room didn’t have a view of the barbeque area.

“Now, Charlotte, wait a second,” Kerrie said as Charlotte shoved on her shoes. “Don’t fly off the handle.”

“Who’s flying off the handle? I’m just going to go out there and ... and ... I don’t know. But I’m going to do something.”

Because Charlotte would rather set her house on fire than let Nicolette sink her manicured claws into Ben.

“What’s going on?” Lindy asked.

“Nothing!” Charlotte and Kerrie said in unison.

“Oh, right. Nothing.”

Charlotte headed for the door. Lindy started to follow her.

“Wait a second, Lindy.” Kerrie grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, and started scribbling. “Here, I want you to give this to Michael for me.”

“Is this a love note?” Lindy asked.

“Just give it to Michael ASAP, okay?”

Lindy sighed. “You’re the bride. Whatever you want.”

“I’ll be back in a few to help you with your dress,” Charlotte called and left, shutting the door behind her.

## Chapter Ten

No way was Charlotte going to leave Ben out there with Nicolette sniffing around him like a hyena in Blahniks. For all she knew, Nicolette had already bagged Grant at the rehearsal dinner, eaten him alive, and was hunting for fresh meat.

Before Charlotte even got outside, she spotted them at a table together. If she'd been wearing sleeves, she'd have rolled them up. Ben noticed Charlotte at once. He immediately got to his feet, stopping Nicolette in mid-sentence, which tickled Charlotte pink.

"W-wow," he stammered at the sight of her. His eyes wandered up and down her figure. As usual, she felt a stab of desire for him that ended up smoldering right between her legs.

"Knock ... knock," he said, grinning.

"Who's there?" she asked with a smile.

"Anita."

"Anita, who?"

He gave her another once over. "Anita handkerchief to wipe up my drool."

Charlotte laughed. Nicolette rolled her eyes, obviously unable to appreciate Ben's quirky humor.

"That dress," he said, "that dress is awesome. You look like a movie star from the forties."

"Thank you, Ben." Charlotte glanced at Nicolette who seemed to be suffering a stroke.

Pity.

"Hrumph," Nicolette huffed. "I'm wearing the exact same dress as she is."

"Is that so?" Ben said without taking his eyes off Charlotte. Man, he thought she'd looked good the night of the Hollywood Bowl, but today she blew that image out of the water. Her hair was all curled up, sparkling with gems like she'd stood in a rainstorm where jewels, not water, fell from the sky. She had make-up on. Her strapless dress was a simple rose color, no frills or bows, but there was a sexy slit on the side of the skirt that made him want to slide his hand up her leg. He couldn't stop staring. He wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her hard, but he was a sweaty, grimy mess. As usual.

"Listen, I can't stay here long," she said. "Kerrie needs me back in there, but I wanted to catch you before you left."

"Yeah, I just finished invoicing your dad. He wanted to pay me today so he could finally put 'all this wedding crap' behind him."

"That's Dad, all right. Oh, here he comes. He's very into closure. Which is why he's such a good salesman."

"He owns Monticello Realty, right?" Ben asked, as if he didn't know.

"Built it from the ground up," Gibson said, handing over a check. "Here you go, son. Thanks again. I shudder to think of the hell I would have endured if you hadn't come through with that gazebo."

“Anytime, Mr. Gibson. Here’s my card if you need any other work done.”

“How many cards you got there?” Mr. Gibson asked, gesturing with his fingers for them. “Why don’t you just give them all to me? I might be able to swing some business your way. Sometimes a house needs a little fixing before it’s fit to sell.”

Ben handed over all the cards he had on him, about ten. “I’d sure appreciate that, Mr. Gibson. I can assure you my standards are usually higher than what you saw today. The joints are rough. It could have used another coat of paint...”

“Son, if what I saw today was a rush job, I can only imagine what you can do when you take your time.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ve been trying to get Charlotte to invite you over to see what I’ve done on her house. The window seat and the veranda were a real challenge, and I think if you saw photos...”

“Gary! I need you!” Mrs. Gibson called from the pool area. “They brought the wrong champagne!”

“We’ll talk some other time, Hayden. Duty calls,” Mr. Gibson said, shaking Ben’s hand and walking off.

Charlotte beamed at him. “My dad likes you,” she said. “I’m pretty crazy about you too. After all, thanks to you, my sister is still going to have the wedding of her dreams. My mom, too,” she added with a laugh. Then her eyes softened. “You really came through for me.”

“How touching,” Nicolette mumbled under her breath, and Ben frowned and turned his back on her. He hated to be rude to women, but he’d already suffered fifteen minutes of her coming on to him like a personal injury attorney pursuing an accident victim. The woman seemed to be part pit bull.

“Anyway,” Charlotte went on, “I have to go back inside to help Kerrie with her dress. I probably won’t be able to get away again before you go. So, thank you again.”

She cupped his face in her hands and when he leaned down, she gave him a kiss so sweet he felt an ache in his chest. For the first time in his life, he wished he’d been invited to a wedding.

Sighing, he decided to check one last time to make sure he’d gotten everything. As he pushed in his chair, it finally sank in how grand the place was. Charlotte had grown up in a goddamn palace. Lifting the lid on the built-in barbecue, he estimated a person could cook a side of beef inside it with room to spare. There were two gas burners on the side, a sink, and next to that, even a refrigerator.

Shoving a hand through his hair, he made his way back toward the gazebo. To his right was the pool, one of those pools that made it look as if the water flowed right off the edge of the property. A little farther away was a tennis court where Ben imagined Charlotte cavorting about in a short little white skirt. He wandered over to get a good look at the view of the valley. All around he saw more estates like this one, lush and large, hundreds of millions of dollars worth. Shaking his head, he finished his review of the area and went to his truck. Three other vehicles had blocked it in. Cursing, he was just about to go back inside to get the owners to move them when Michael jogged up to him.

“Leaving?” he asked.

“Trying to.” Ben gestured to the jam of vehicles.

“I’ll get them to move. I’m sure you want to get out of here.”

“Thanks.”

“Before you go, I wanted to thank you again for what you did today, and if you want, Kerrie and I would both love to have you come back and enjoy the reception.”

Despite his earlier yearning to attend, Ben shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’m kinda beat.”

“Come on. Free food? Open bar? Kerrie’s dad went all out. Come back and enjoy yourself. You deserve it after all your hard work.”

“I don’t know...” Ben jangled his keys in his hand.

“Okay,” Michael said. “I’m not going to force you. But if you change your mind, you’re welcome to come, seriously.”

They shook hands, then Ben got into his truck and drove away. Did he really want to go to that fancy wedding like a male Cinderella to the ball? He didn’t have a fairy godmother to deck him out in fancy duds. All he had was an eight-year-old suit that fit too tightly in the shoulders.

Nah, he was exhausted, and rightly so. Working in the dark, battling the wind--and a certain pompous asshole--had taken it out of him. He’d be much better off getting some much-needed shut-eye.

\* \* \* \*

After kissing Ben goodbye, Charlotte headed back to Kerrie’s room. Nicolette hurried to catch up, her heels clicking on the floor like rounds from a machine gun.

“What was that all about?” Nicolette asked as they wove their way through the caterers crowded in the kitchen.

“What was what all about?” Charlotte replied.

“That whole kiss thing.”

“It’s really none of your business, Nic.”

Coming out of the kitchen, Charlotte rounded the corner and almost ran right into Lindy.

“Oh, good. There you are,” Lindy said, falling into step with them. “Kerrie sent me to look for you. I swear I should have put on my running shoes with all the errands she’s sending me on. Not that I run, of course.”

“Except at the mouth,” said Nicolette.

Lindy laughed.

As the three of them went up the stairs, Nicolette said, “So, are you and Ben together?”

“I wish!” Lindy exclaimed. She touched a hand to her necklace, then moved the clasp around to the back of her neck. “That guy is like the Muhammad Ali of construction workers! Totally buff, and super, super nice.”

Nicolette ignored Lindy. “So, what is the deal with him, Charlotte? I can’t believe that...”

“He’s mine,” Charlotte said finally as they arrived at Kerrie’s room. “The man is mine, so keep your

mitts off him.”

Apparently stunned into paralysis, Nicolette stood in the hall as Charlotte went in and, without a word to Kerrie, snatched up the life-raft slip.

“You can’t be serious.” Nicolette regained the use of her legs and stalked in.

“Serious about what?” Kerrie asked, but Lindy shook her head vigorously.

“There’s no way that guy is yours,” Nicolette said.

“Which guy?” one of the other bridesmaids asked.

“Ben. The gazebo guy,” Lindy said.

Charlotte helped Kerrie step into the wedding gown, basking in the *oohs* and *aahs*. Everyone agreed that he was a prime specimen of the male species.

“That hunk interested in Shrinking Charlotte?” muttered Nicolette. “Please.”

It had been years since Charlotte had heard that old nickname, a stupid variation on ‘shrinking violet’ that Nicolette had coined way back in junior high.

“Nic, cut it out,” Kerrie said as Charlotte zipped up the dress. “Help me with the veil, sis. It’s not strange at all. Ben’s been working on Charlotte’s house for months, and all that time he wanted to ask her out but didn’t because he never mixes business with pleasure. But her house is pretty much finished now and, well...”

Kerrie glanced at Charlotte, tossing her the conversational ball.

Charlotte caught it adroitly. “What can I say? The man is a dynamo in bed. He gave me the best sex I’ve ever had in my entire life. Bar none. We’re talking orgasm after orgasm. In fact, what that man...” Charlotte trailed off as she fussed with Kerrie’s veil. “Oh, never mind.”

There was a blizzard of protest.

“Come on, Charlotte.”

“You can’t do that. You have to tell now!”

Charlotte shrugged. “I was just going to say that, well, what that man can do with his mouth is probably illegal in many states.” Charlotte blithely fluffed the veil while the women exploded in a babble over that tasty bit of information.

Nicolette, however, didn’t join in. “I suppose you’re right. Now that I think about it, it’s not so hard to believe,” she said, absently smoothing a wrinkle in her dress. “I mean, I suppose women aren’t the only ones who do it.”

“Do what?” Lindy asked. “Oral sex?”

“No,” Nicolette said, rolling her eyes. “Use sex to get ahead.”

Kerrie slowly stood up. “Nic...,” she said in a warning tone.

“No, it’s okay, Kerrie,” Charlotte said, squaring her shoulders and facing Nicolette. “What exactly are

you suggesting?"

Nicolette plucked a petal off her bouquet. "Just that Ben has a contracting business. Your dad owns one of the top real estate agencies on this side of the hill. It's not out of the realm of possibility that he saw a business opportunity there."

Charlotte gasped. "Why you little..."

"Stop it, both of you!" Kerrie's eyes flashed with anger. "Nic, will you please grow up, for God's sake? We're not in junior high anymore, and I'm really tired of the constant hostility between you and Charlotte. It's been going on for way too many years, but it's stopping today. You need to get over whatever problem you have with my sister right now and apologize."

"Apologize?" Nicolette looked incredulous. "To Charlotte?"

"That's right. Apologize," Kerrie repeated. "If you can't treat my sister with the respect she deserves, then you can just march right out the door."

"You can't be serious," Nicolette exclaimed. "What about the wedding?"

"The wedding will go forward as planned. I have no problem having an odd number of wedding attendants up there with Michael and me, so it's your choice."

All eyes swung toward Nicolette, who stood there, aghast, and a bit purple in the face, Charlotte noted with satisfaction. Where was the videographer when she needed him?

In a decidedly strangled voice, Nicolette choked out, "I'm sorry, Charlotte."

"Apology accepted," Charlotte said magnanimously.

"All right, good." Kerrie nodded once and swept her skirt like a matador. "Now let's get outside and take some kick ass pictures."

\* \* \* \*

Ben looked at his reflection in the full-length mirror. He liked what he saw.

The sales associate at the men's wear store nodded. "That's a perfect fit, sir." He glanced at his watch. "And within the allotted time, I might add."

Ben smiled. Two and a half hours ago, Ben had spotted the store and pulled into the parking lot on an impulse. He had told himself that he was just going to see if they had a suit he liked on the rack.

They did.

Then, when he found one, he thought he might as well ask them if they could do the alterations on the spot.

They could.

Then, it had only been a matter of deciding to take the money Mr. Gibson had just paid him for the gazebo job and buy something he would probably only wear once a year, if that. He thought about the expression on Charlotte's face when she got an eyeful of him in this slick, tailored suit instead of his usual grimy work clothes. If he could floor her with his appearance, the way she had him in that bridesmaid's dress, then he thought it was worth the money. So he'd gone home to shower up, shave,

and pick up one little item, then returned to the store to get dressed.

By the time he returned to the Gibson mansion, the party was in full swing. Even inside his truck, he could hear the sounds of the band playing "Love Shack," and the dancers singing along. He pulled up to the front where the parking valets came to their feet.

"Deliveries are--oh, you're a guest," the kid said.

"Yep. I'm a guest." Ben handed him the keys, mindful that the truck bed was still filled with his tools and supplies from the morning's work.

As he walked up the front steps, he tugged on his shirt sleeves. He knew he'd feel like a coal miner barging in on high tea, but that hadn't stopped him. Hell, no. It was the Hollywood Bowl all over again, except this time he'd been invited. He couldn't stand the thought of Grant and Charlotte at the same social function (hell, in the same city) without being there to keep an eye on things. His traitorous brain had supplied him with images of her, not in his bed or in his arms, but in Grant's sleek convertible, laughing at one of his jokes. Sipping champagne at dusk while being serenaded by a live orchestra. Or worse yet, walking down the aisle on the guy's arm.

And so here he was, willing to wallow at Charlotte's feet and tell her the one thing he'd been trying so damn hard to keep secret from her. He felt deep down that she wouldn't care about his lack of a diploma, but that didn't stop him from breaking out in a cold sweat at the thought of telling her. His brain told him that they could be good together despite their differences, but his gut churned like a cement mixer when he thought about seeing pity in her eyes.

Screw that, he thought. Better get it over with and find out instead of wrestling with it any longer. If she couldn't accept him the way he was, then they had a problem.

Just his luck that Grant intercepted him when he was halfway across the flagstone walk leading to the brightly lit white canopies. The man wore a sophisticated black tuxedo, and with the martini glass in his hand, he looked like the quintessential playboy.

"What th' hell are you doing here, Hayden?"

"Michael and Kerrie invited me." Ben ran a finger along his collar. He wasn't used to wearing ties.

"Well, well, well. Isn't that nice." Grant sipped his drink. "Next thing you know they'll be asking the waiters to have some cake."

Gritting his teeth, Ben tried to pass by. "I'm going to go congratulate them. If you'll excuse me."

Ben had never uttered the pompous phrase "if you'll excuse me" in his entire life, but it seemed fitting here.

Drop kicking Grant out of his mind, he found Charlotte standing off to the side with another bridesmaid. Feeling bit devilish, he snuck up behind her and planted a hot kiss on the side of her neck. She gasped and whirled around.

"Ben!" She laid a hand over the spot he'd kissed, and her face lit up so brightly, he felt like he'd grown an inch.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed, giving him the once-over. "You look ... you look amazing."

"I'll say," agreed Lindy.

"What are you doing here?" Charlotte asked him.

"Your sister and new brother-in-law invited me."

"I think I need to be somewhere else," Lindy said, leaving them with a wink at Charlotte.

"How about a dance, baby?" he asked her. "They're playing our song."

Charlotte cocked her head and laughed. "'Shout' is our song?"

"You bet." He leaned close and whispered in her ear, "When I'm deep inside you, Charlotte, you make me wanna shout."

Gasping, she leaned back abruptly. "You shouldn't talk like that," she said, but her eyes had gone all dark with desire.

He pulled her close again, his mouth at her ear. "I thought that turned you on, when I talk dirty to you."

She trembled in his arms and his cock pulsed hard, ready for action. "It does turn me on," she said under her breath, "but now isn't the time."

"Anytime is the time with you, Charlotte. I want you twenty-four seven. I have a serious hard-on right now that's gonna make it damn hard to dance. Isn't there somewhere private we can go?"

He felt like a jerk coming on to her like this, but he couldn't seem to rein in his libido when he was around her. He'd meant to have a serious talk with her, but hell, they could talk later. After he'd had her in the butler's pantry or wherever.

"They're going to toss the bouquet and do the garter thing soon. I have to be here for that."

"All we need is five minutes," he said in her ear. "Five minutes and I'll have you coming hard, Charlotte."

"Oh, God," she said. "All right, come quick."

"That's the plan," he said with a grin as she grabbed his hand and led him toward the house.



## Chapter Eleven

Charlotte and Ben hurried to the guest bathroom near the front of the house. Once they were inside, he quickly clicked the button lock.

"I've never done anything like this before," Charlotte said, giggling.

Ben captured her mouth, groping her ass with greedy hands. When she was breathing as hard as he was, he broke the kiss and said gruffly, "Turn around and pull up your skirt."

Charlotte obeyed, and Ben just about had a coronary looking at her ass covered by a lacy scrap of satin. She wore a pair of mind-blowing thigh-high stockings. Jesus God, he wanted to lick his way around the tops of them, but they didn't have time for that.

Hooking his thumbs under the elastic, he yanked her panties down. They caught on her ankles, and with a sexy flick of her foot, she sent them flying into the corner.

Yanking his belt open, he said, "Spread your legs."

Again, she did as he asked, and as she leaned over the sink, he slid his thumb along her wet slit. His cock pulsed hard. He undid his pants and released it. He was about to push inside when he stopped.

"Shit, we don't have a condom," he cursed. "Shit, shit, shit."

Ben clenched his jaw as his body rebelled at the idea that sex was now out of the question. His cock ached and his legs all but trembled.

Charlotte shook her head. "No, wait! By the front door, there's a whole bag full of condoms. Lindy and I were going to dump them inside the limo later as a joke. Go get one."

Without another word, Ben stuffed himself back inside his pants. He slipped out of the bathroom, like an operative on a covert mission. Luckily, he didn't encounter anyone on his foray for a rubber. Snatching a packet, he hightailed it back to the bathroom.

He knocked. "It's me. Open up."

Charlotte opened the door with a smile. "No, knock knock joke?"

"You want a joke at a time like this?" he asked, closing the door behind him and undoing his pants again.

She gave a throaty little laugh. "I like your jokes."

Christ. Thinking fast, he said, "Knock, knock."

Rip. Condom open. Charlotte pulled her skirt up again, revealing those sexy thigh-highs again. Ben gulped hard as he tossed aside the wrapper and then sheathed himself in one deft stroke.

"Who's there?"

"Ben," he said, taking her by the shoulders and turning her around.

Charlotte gasped and wriggled as he took his erection in hand and levered it into place. "Ben, who?"

"Bend over, baby," he said, and laying a hand on her lower back, he flexed his knees. "It's time to rock

and roll.”

He groaned as he sank into her. She was a tight, wet bundle of heaven. Bracketing her arms with his own, he pulled back and pushed inside again. Pleasure raced through his body, down his legs, out towards even his fingertips. Charlotte arched back to meet him as he pumped.

“Yeah,” he grunted, hunched over her. He moved his hands to her hips. “You feel so good, Charlotte.”

Over and over, in and out. With a firm grip, he pulled her against him, impaling her again and again, a hard, rapid slamfest. His belt buckle clanked against the counter. Charlotte shuddered against him when he reached around and found her clitoris with his fingers.

Voices approached. A couple laughing and talking, their footsteps clacking against the marble entry.

“Ben...”

“Forget them,” he ordered under his breath. Determined to send her over, he thrust harder and grunted in her ear, “Come, baby. Come for me now, Charlotte...”

He felt her body tense, heard her breath catch, and then she climaxed. She shoved back against him so hard he nearly lost his balance. A split second later, his own floodgate burst. Explosion after explosion buffeted Ben, but it was more than physical, much more.

As he leaned against her, panting from his exertions, he realized that somehow this had gone way beyond proving his virility. He’d been an idiot to think what he felt for her was purely physical. He loved her. He’d been in love with her for a long time.

Why else would he be so eager to work on her house, even in a downpour or the blazing heat of a Southern California summer? Why did he feel so ridiculously proud of himself when she praised him for a job well done? And thinking about the fretwork, he wondered why he felt this compelling need to find out what pleased her, what she wanted, and provide it for her, if not for love?

When he’d heard her on the phone last night reassuring Kerrie that the gazebo could be fixed, she’d sounded so upset, and something inside him revved up, like the engine on his power saw. He’d felt nothing but a driving determination to come through for her. She’d needed him. End of story. He would have built the goddamned Taj Mahal for her if that’s what had been required.

“Oh, God,” she gasped. “I can’t breathe.”

Ben eased up a little. “Sorry.” He bent his head and kissed her neck. It was a little salty.

“Charlotte, where are you?” a voice called.

“Shoot, that’s Lindy!” Charlotte hissed, pushing ineffectively at his hips. “Ben, hurry up, pull out. I have to get back there!”

Fighting his smile, Ben withdrew. While Charlotte righted her clothing and picked up her panties, he got rid of the condom and wrapper.

“Oh, God, do I look okay? Do you think anyone will suspect?” She was frantically trying to pin some wayward hair back up where it belonged.

Ben looked her over. Her dress had suffered a few wrinkles from being bunched up around her waist, and her cheeks were still flushed with passion. To him, she had that very satisfying just-fucked look

about her that made him want to strut around like a rooster.

“You look perfect,” he said truthfully. “Don’t worry. Everyone’s going to be looking at the bride anyway.”

“Okay,” she said, smoothing at the wrinkles without much luck. “Don’t come out right away. Everyone will know that we were fooling around if we come out together.”

As she pressed her ear up to the door like a teenager trying to sneak out of the house after curfew, Ben decided he actually didn’t mind if people knew they’d just had sex in the bathroom. In fact, he wanted people to know. He had this crazy urge to mark her so that everyone knew she was his. The image of a tattoo emblazoned on her ass that said, “Property of Ben Hayden,” flashed in his mind. Chuckling, he didn’t think Charlotte would go for that.

But, you know, his angel voice suggested, there is a way to show she’s off limits. A time-honored way, just as permanent as inking her skin, but a lot less painful.

As Ben paused in the act of tucking his shirt in, his heart sped up again, testing the idea of marriage to Charlotte. He already knew he loved her. Was he ready for marriage?

*Absolutely not. What, are you crazy?*

As he buttoned his pants, the devil voice rattled off all its usual reasons why engagement rings were weapons of mass destruction. But Ben ignored the voice. As a carpenter, he’d learned long ago to check and recheck his measurements so that he could be certain that when he cut the lumber or what have you, he’d end up with a perfect fit. Amazingly enough, he didn’t have to think long to realize that Charlotte was his perfect fit. When he pictured his ring on her finger, his entire being felt complete, like all his life he’d been a rough blueprint waiting for someone to build him. Charlotte was that someone.

## Chapter Twelve

A knock sounded at the bathroom door startling them both.

“Charlotte? Are you in there?” came Lindy’s voice.

“I’ll be right out!” Charlotte exclaimed, giving Ben a pained look.

“Well, hurry up,” Lindy replied. “Kerrie wants you right now! It’s time to throw the bouquet.”

“I have to go,” Charlotte said to Ben.

“No, wait. We have to talk. Please, listen to me.”

Ben took her hand in his, took a deep breath, and knelt down on the cold marble floor.

Charlotte gasped. “Ben Hayden, what on earth are you doing?” He couldn’t be doing what she thought he was doing.

“Oh, my God! Is Ben in there with you?” Lindy asked in a high-pitched voice.

“Ben, I have to go!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“Just wait one more minute, okay?” Ben pleaded. “What’s your middle name?”

“Re-Rebecca.”

Ben gulped hard, clasped her hand in both of his and said solemnly, “Charlotte Rebecca Gibson, will you be my wife?”

Charlotte stared at him, dumbfounded. When she was able to talk again, she said, “I’m realizing now that I never did get my ears cleaned.”

He chuckled. “You don’t need your ears cleaned. I want you to marry me.”

“This is a joke, right?”

“Did I say knock knock?” He squeezed her hand. His eyes burned with emotion. “Come on, let’s go to Vegas, like you said. Skip all this messy stuff and just get married. Now. Tonight.”

Lindy knocked harder. “Charlotte, come on! Ben, zip it up! Kerrie’s going to throw a fit if you don’t get back there right now!”

Charlotte tried to think, but with almost no sleep the night before and the stress of Lindy chattering just outside the door, it was almost impossible.

“But I don’t understand,” Charlotte said. “What changed during the last twenty-four hours? Last night you wanted me to come back to your house for sex. I thought that’s all it was between us. Sex.”

Ben grimaced. “I know. I thought it was too, but I was wrong. If you just listen to me, I’ll explain.”

“Oh, God, Ben, not now,” Charlotte said, wrenching open the door. “This is the ultimate in bad timing!”

“Hey, don’t blame me,” Lindy said, standing right there. “Kerrie’s the one who sent me over here!”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Charlotte said to Lindy.

“Charlotte, we’re not done here,” Ben said. “The minute that bouquet is thrown--?” He stopped short, scowling.

Charlotte followed his line of vision to see Grant ambling over, a smirk smeared on his face as he took in Charlotte’s disheveled hair, wrinkled dress. She felt a telltale flush of guilt spread over her face.

“Whatcha doin’, Charlotte?” Grant said, obviously putting two and two together. “Slumming?”

Before Charlotte could even process what Grant had said, Ben rushed toward him. Lindy shrieked, and Grant danced back, hands up, with an I-can’t-fight-you-because-I-might-damage-my-hands expression on his face. That didn’t stop Ben from slamming him up against the wall. Grant’s breath rushed out along with a low grunt of pain.

“You son of a bitch,” Ben said through gritted teeth. “I’ve had about all of you that I can take in one day.”

“Stop it, both of you!” Charlotte cried. “This isn’t the time or the place!”

Ben kept a tight grip on Grant’s lapels, crumpling the fabric of the tuxedo, but he didn’t hit him. That’s all Charlotte needed, for Grant to walk back to the reception bruised and bloody. She grabbed at Ben’s jacket, but trying to pull him off of Grant was like trying to remove Lincoln’s nose from Mount Rushmore.

“Ben, let go of him,” Charlotte said in what she hoped was a calming voice. “Please, Ben. Please, don’t ruin Kerrie’s wedding.”

Ben inhaled slowly. Charlotte saw the muscles in his jaw relax as he stepped back from Grant and lowered his arms.

Grant pulled his tuxedo jacket back into place, tugged at his sleeves.

“I should have expected you to resort to violence,” he said smugly.

“Will you shut up, Grant?” Charlotte cried, all but leaping between them as Ben took a step forward. “What is your problem?”

“I’ll tell you what his problem is,” Ben growled. “He’s a conceited, pretentious asshole.”

Studying his reflection in the glass of the French door, Grant straightened his bow tie. “Pretentious? That’s quite a word to be coming from you, my friend.” With a pat to his hair, Grant added offhandedly, “Considering how hard you had to struggle in English.”

Flexing his fingers open and closed, Ben fought to control his anger. The only thing that stopped him from giving Grant another shove, this time through the glass door, was Charlotte, blocking his way with her hands on his chest. It really pissed him off that the only way he could think of to retaliate was with his fists. He couldn’t very well deny having struggled in English and every other subject in high school requiring a textbook.

“You know,” Grant said. “I don’t remember seeing you at commencement, now that I think about it. Why is that, do you think?”

“You know damn well why, you bastard. You might as well say it.”

“Say what?” Lindy asked.

At that moment, Ben decided to beat Grant to the punch. With his stomach feeling like it was full of wet cement, he looked Charlotte straight in the eye and confessed. “What Grant is so anxious for you to find out is that I’m a drop out. I never graduated from high school.”

Ben knew Grant would have a self-satisfied smile on his face, but he didn’t let his gaze waver from Charlotte’s. Fearful of her reaction, he steeled himself, but instead of pity or disappointment, he saw nothing but acceptance.

“I don’t care about that,” she said, confirming it.

Grant scoffed. “Fact of the matter is, I even tried to help him. Tutored him twice a week, but he still couldn’t make the grade.”

Charlotte’s eyes went dark and narrow. Calmly, she turned around. “You know what?” she said, poking Grant in the chest with her finger. “Ben is right. You are conceited and pretentious. And you’re a sore loser, too. I can’t believe I considered going out with you again.”

“And for your information,” Charlotte went on, “a man’s worth isn’t defined by how many pieces of paper are hanging on his wall. It’s defined by his actions and his character. And his heart. And I’ll take that over a magna cum anything.”

Grant stood speechless for a moment, but then he laughed stiffly. Reaching for the handle of the patio door, he said, “Obviously, you can’t tell the difference between caviar and peanut butter.”

“Ha!” Charlotte scoffed. “I happen to love peanut butter. And I think caviar is highly overrated. Just like you!”

But Grant had already left.

“Shithead,” she muttered, brushing her hands together like she was dusting dirt off them. The man was such a loser he couldn’t even muster up the guts to face her parting shot.

Ben startled her when he took her gently by the shoulders. “You love me,” he said with that boyish grin he had. “You’re my witness, Lindy. She said she loves me.”

“I did?” Charlotte said.

“You said you love peanut butter,” Ben explained. “I’m the peanut butter.”

Lindy nodded. “You did say that, Charlotte, and you said all that other nice stuff about him, too.”

Charlotte wrinkled her nose at Ben. “I did, didn’t I…”

Ben laughed.

“You love her, too, don’t you?” Lindy asked Ben, looking like she might cry.

“Damn right, I do.” Getting down on his knee again, he said, “Charlotte, I’m asking you again. Please marry me. I love you.”

“Oh, my God,” Lindy said breathlessly, “This is unbelievable. He’s like the Muhammad Ali of

romance!”

Charlotte wrung her hands. “See, I’m still having trouble buying that you’re in love with me.”

“Why?”

“It’s against nature. I mean, come on, Ben. Look at you and then look at me. You’re a Beautiful Person, with capital letters. I’m a mouse. I’m--I’m Shrinking Charlotte.”

“You’re what?” Ben shook his head, looking astonished. “No, let’s get something straight right now. You can think of yourself however you want. I can’t do anything about that. But know this.” He cupped her face in his hands and stared into her eyes. “When I look at you, I see a woman that I want to spend the rest of my life with. A woman I want to make love to day and night. A woman I’d make yards and yards of hummingbird fretwork for if it would make her smile.”

“You’d make my fretwork?” she whispered.

“I already did.”

Ben reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small piece of wood, which he held it out to her. She took it with trembling hands and realized this was what he’d hidden in his garage. Sanded smooth, the wood felt like velvet. She pictured him there late at night, carving her precious hummingbirds in his spare time.

As she let her fingers glide over the carved silhouettes, Charlotte’s world came into sharp focus, as if her life was under a giant microscope, and she’d just adjusted the knob. Through the eyepiece, she saw her future. And it was this humble man, so big both in stature and in heart. The man who saved her sister’s wedding. The man who’d watched over her so carefully when she’d insisted on hammering a token shingle onto her roof. The man, she thought with a smile, who willingly ate all the pineapple she’d ever foisted on him.

“Charlotte, answer him!” Lindy exclaimed. “He asked you to marry him, and he gave you this ... this...” She frowned, obviously at a loss. “This significant piece of wood!”

Charlotte opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted by Kerrie yanking the French door open and stalking into the house.

“What is going on?” The irate bride faced Lindy and shook the bridal bouquet at her. Several rose petals fluttered to the floor. “I sent you to get Charlotte and come right back!”

“I know, but he ... they...” Lindy gestured toward Ben and then at Charlotte. “You just won’t believe it.”

“Believe what?” Kerrie’s expression turned from irritation to bewilderment as she noticed Ben on his knee in front of Charlotte.

“I seem to have gotten engaged, sis,” Charlotte said, a bit awestruck. “I’m getting married.”

Ben let out a whoop as he leapt to his feet. He scooped Charlotte up and swung her around and around as she laughed. Then, with a rough groan, he crushed her to him, hugging her so tightly she couldn’t breathe for a moment. His mouth was on hers, a hot caress of lips and tongue that both aroused and elated her.

When Ben broke the kiss, he didn’t set her back on the floor.

“Tell me, Charlotte. Tell me the words. I want to hear you say them.”

With joy flooding her heart, Charlotte said, “I love you, Ben, and I want to marry you.”

With that, he swung her around again crazily, almost knocking over a large ceramic vase near the door. Lindy and Kerrie hugged, jumping up and down and shrieking like game show contestants. More petals came loose.

“Oh, my God!” Kerrie exclaimed after letting go of Lindy. “I can’t believe it. Let’s go tell everyone. I especially want to see Dad’s face!”

Charlotte pushed some hair out of her face, still laughing. “No, Kerr, I’d rather keep this low key for now.”

Kerrie frowned. “Are you sure? The whole family is here…”

Charlotte looked at Ben. As if reading her mind, he said, “No, Kerrie, it’s your special day. Yours and Michael’s. We’ll tell everyone some other time.”

“Okay, then. You had your chance,” Kerrie said, flouncing toward the patio door. “Now, let’s go throw this damn bouquet before it falls apart completely.”

Kerrie swished outside, leading the way back to the pavilion, leaving a sparse trail of flower petals behind her. Lindy hurried after, chattering away.

“Do you really want to elope to Vegas?” Charlotte asked Ben as they followed.

“Charlotte, if you want me to dress up like The King and sing “Hound Dog” at the Viva Las Vegas Wedding Chapel, I’ll do it. As long as I get to make you mine.”

“Then we’re of the same mind,” she replied with a smile that warmed his heart.

Ben grinned widely, tucking her under his arm, happier than he had a right to be.

It wasn’t until much later that he began to wonder if he had condemned himself to a rockabilly, karaoke, costumed wedding in Sin City.



## Epilogue

### Four months later

#### 1 a.m.

Charlotte leaned against Ben's truck, waiting for his signal that it was all right to go inside her--she corrected her thoughts with a smile--*their* house.

She still wore her simple wedding dress, having finally left the reception at her parents' place. As fun as it would have been to see Ben howling out an Elvis tune in a one-piece, bejeweled pantsuit, Charlotte couldn't deprive her mother of part two of her gazebo dream. They hosted about one hundred guests, Grant and Nicolette not among them.

The wedding night was to be spent here, but tomorrow afternoon, she and Ben were jetting to Hawaii for their honeymoon. Ben had never been there, and Charlotte was looking forward to sharing the beauty of the islands with him. To that end, they'd rented a jeep, booked a helicopter ride, a snorkeling excursion, and of course, a tour of a pineapple plantation. She was still having trouble getting her plants to produce fruit, and she might as well get advice from the experts.

Still, even with the excitement of the honeymoon ahead, it was a relief to be home, especially since Ben hadn't let her set foot inside for the past week, insisting that they stay at his place. He had some special surprise planned. She couldn't wait to see what it was, but she didn't think anything could top the intricate fretwork that now adorned the roofline of the house.

The sound of the door opening brought her out of her thoughts. Ben emerged from the house looking roguishly handsome. It wasn't only his tuxedo shirt and loose tie that twisted her heart up into a blissful knot, it was the look on his face, a combination of playfulness, eagerness, and glee.

"Knock knock," he said, sauntering over.

"Who's there?"

"What do you mean, 'who's there?' Don't you even know your own husband?"

Charlotte laughed as he took her hand and drew her toward the house.

"Come on," he said. "Come see your surprise. Oh, wait a sec."

Before she knew it, Ben had scooped her up in his arms and was carrying her up the steps and across the threshold. He stole a kiss while he was at it, leaving her wanting more, even though she was exhausted.

"Now, Mrs. Hayden," he said, setting her down in the middle of the foyer like she was made of glass. He tucked his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "See if you can find your wedding present."

Charlotte saw it immediately and her heart swelled with love, but tapping her index finger on her lips, she looked around and said with mock innocence, "Hmmm ... did you vacuum?"

"No," he said, laughing.

"You dusted, then."

"No, I didn't do any housework. Now be serious!" He gave her a pleading look.

“Oh, I know what my surprise is,” she said, sidling up to him. “And I can’t wait to unwrap it.” With a wicked smile, she caressed him right through his pants.

His eyes darkened, and she felt him throb against her hand. A low chuckle rumbled out of him, and he said with a grin, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Hayden, Big Ben isn’t your surprise either.”

Charlotte burst out laughing. “Oh, brother,” she said, as she let go of him reluctantly. “Big Ben, indeed.”

Chuckling, she wandered over to the staircase, still pretending to be searching. Then, she laid her hand right on the new pineapple finial and said, “So, am I hot or cold?”

Charlotte didn’t bother trying to get away when he lunged for her.

“You little devil!” he exclaimed. “You knew all the time!” he said.

She hugged him tightly. “Ben, I absolutely love it. I love it and I love you. It goes perfectly with Aunt Marcy’s strawberry.” She gazed up at him, all joking aside now. “I couldn’t think of a gift that could mean more. I feel like we’re following in their footsteps.”

She kissed him, happier than she’d ever been in her life, and when they broke apart, she could see in his eyes that he felt the same way.

“I carved it myself, you know.”

“Of course, I know. There isn’t anything you can’t do with those hands.”

Ben leaned down and nuzzled her neck. “Have I told you lately how much I love *your* hands?”

“Not really,” she replied, her breath coming a little faster. “Not today, at least.”

“Think you could maybe wrap them around Big Ben? I really like watching you do that.”

“Oh, yes,” she breathed as he sucked her earlobe into his mouth. “And all you have to do in return is...”

“I know,” Ben interjected, scooping her up in his arms again.

Charlotte smiled. As he carried her up the stairs, he started describing in vivid detail exactly how he was going to make love to her all night, and Charlotte shivered in moist anticipation.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Kate Willoughby got hooked on romance in the late seventies when she read *Sweet Savage Love* by Rosemary Rogers. Inspired, she and her best friend wrote a contemporary love story involving a multi-millionaire and the restaurant hostess determined to cure his drinking problem. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it), that manuscript has been lost forever.

Fast forward to college, where she took a creative writing course. Kate still wanted to write love stories, but everyone else in the class was composing Important Literature and Thought-Provoking Poetry. A few devastating critiques later, she gave up, discouraged and embarrassed. Eventually, her muse got over the trauma and pestered her to try her hand at writing again. *Carnal Devotions* was her first published book.

Kate resides in Los Angeles with her husband of fifteen years and her two sons. When the testosterone in the house builds up to unbearable levels, she escapes by reading, cooking, and scrapbooking with friends. She's a diehard Internet junkie, so readers can find her at her website [kate-willoughby.com](http://kate-willoughby.com), by email [kate\\_willoughby@yahoo.com](mailto:kate_willoughby@yahoo.com), or at her blog [katewilloughby.blogspot.com](http://katewilloughby.blogspot.com).

**Meet LSB Authors At Silver Net, Aka The House Of Sin <http://lsbooks.net>**

**We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books**

<http://lsbooks.com>

for other exciting erotic romances.

**Featured Series:**

**The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors**

Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

**The Raven Series by Rhiannon Neeley**

Seven books about the brooding Raven family of vampire hunters

**The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan**

Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

**The Max Series by JB Skully**

Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!